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The American University in Cairo  
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**URBAN GEOGRAPHIES OF ROMANCE: MEETING AND MATING IN CAIRO**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Middle East Studies Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts

by Elaine van Dalen

under the supervision of  
Dr. M. Rieker

readers  
Dr. H. Rizzo and Dr. S. Seikaly

August 2013

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I wish to thank my friends Mervat, Gihan and their mother for their assistance, friendliness and hospitality that have been the starting point for my research in their neighborhood.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a spatial analysis of engagement and marriage among young people from Būlāq ad-Dakrūr, Cairo. It explores how these individuals negotiate their access to spaces within a neoliberal city and use them to find potential partners, meet those partners once they have found them and to live with those partners when they first get married. The researcher had informal conversations with about 30 individuals between the age 18 and 30 and their family members, mostly during the spring of 2013. The outcome shows that the neighborhood has a primary function in the shaping of gendered subjectivities that try to live up to the expectations in their community and therefore choose to act in certain ways in relation to engagement and partner finding. Though neighborhood etiquette prescribes that people of opposite sexes who are not related are not supposed to meet each other unless they're married, young individuals creatively search for opportunities to meet with people of the other sex in spaces away from the eyes who can judge them about doing so. The mobility of young women, who often work in low-paid service jobs in more affluent adjacent areas and go to school outside their neighborhood, is central to new understandings of engagements as more temporal relationships that involve fun and romance and come to mean more than just official agreements between families. The anonymity of public spaces in the city offers possibilities of secrecy, privacy and adventure away from a neighborhood community whose moral expectations would otherwise restrict much of young people's actions. While many spaces in the city have increasingly become privatized and mostly accessible to people with money, such as clubs and cafés, young poor people are yet creative to assert their right to the city and make use of those open places still available to their use. Many young women continue to use their ability to negotiate their freedom of movement within the spaces of their new house and outside of it after they marry.

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“Every building functions in the creation of two kinds of space: its internal space, completely defined by the building itself, and its external or urban space, defined by that building and the others around it.” Bruno Zevi, *Architecture and Space*, 32.

“The most elementary distinction of space is the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’;” it is “the very distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘world’.” Donatella Mazzoleni

On most days of the year the old bridge that connects Zamalek, an upper class island in the middle of the Nile, with Downtown Cairo is full of young couples. They lean on the balustrades while they enjoy the view of the river and the tall hotels on its sides. One can witness them as they stroll slowly on the sidewalks along the water while holding hands, sit on the benches in one of the nearby parks, or take boat rides on the river. Years ago I walked home from Zamalek with a friend when we saw that a long line of young men and women occupied the pavement in front of us. We joked that it must be “national couples day”. Only later I discovered that there was much more to it, that these couples did not live on Zamalek but came from low-income neighborhoods nearby to find spaces of romance and intimacy on the bridge and the parks around it, and that the couples’ visits to these places were part of a courting system particular to some of Cairo’s contemporary urban working classes.

## RESEARCH FOCUS

This thesis offers a spatial analysis of engagement and marriage among young inhabitants of Būlāq ad-Dakrūr, Gīza in a neoliberal Cairo post-2011. I research how neoliberal policies influence the lifeworld of these people and inform their actions related to partner finding and marriage. In a neoliberal city, such as Cairo, a lack of government regulation combined with a free market allow the rich to become richer and increase the poverty of the poor, in part as a result of cuts on government spending on welfare. The rich build their gated communities on the edge of city and develop their elite neighborhoods

within the city that create and support spaces of the poor around them through the provision of low wage service jobs. This polarization between rich and poor comes with a high level of privatization as the rich take over spaces of leisure everywhere in the city. They have their clubs along the Nile, fill their neighborhoods with expensive cafés, malls and cinemas, while such spaces in poorer, informal neighborhoods lack and the poor can't afford to visit those spaces of leisure in formal areas. The availability of freely accessible open spaces in the city is thus limited for the poor. Yet the mobility of poor young men and women isn't restricted. Many young people from Būlāq go to school outside their neighborhood and work in the shops, hotels, cafés and nurseries of the rich in adjacent formal neighborhoods. These configurations of spaces in neoliberal Cairo combined with young people's mobility make that find partners and marry in a way particular to Cairo post 2011. I analyze how these individuals use and create social spaces within and outside their neighborhood to find and meet partners and how they (dis)continue to use these spaces after they marry. A focus on how young people from informal neighborhoods use public spaces in formal neighborhoods to court and meet partners, as well as spaces of the house and neighborhood later in marriage, is a fascinating starting point to explore contemporary understandings of engagements and marriage, gender roles in the neighborhood. Such a study also further reveals the reciprocal relationship between the gendered meanings of social spaces and gendered patterns of social behavior relevant for people in this age group. My research concentrates on engaged couples between eighteen and thirty years old, who plan to marry after a year, as well as newly-weds who have been married for about one or two years.

## **RESEARCH SETTING**

The feminist geographer Doreen Massey(1994, 2005) extensively advocated the importance of space for the understanding of the gendered structures of everyday life. Other



scholars have contributed important studies related to social space and gender studies as well (for a literature review see Liz Bondi and Damaris Rose (2010), also cf. Bondi 1992, Longhurst 1995, and Löw 2006). The *Gender, Place and Culture* journal is an important contemporary magazine with contributions on the space/gender debate, with many influential pieces (for example Baydar 2012, Doan 2010, Johnson 2008).

Tovi Fenster and Hanaa Hamdan-Saliba (2013) provide a literature review on “gender and feminist geographies in the Middle East”. Scholars have done work on these topics in Cairo using different theoretical frameworks. Farha Ghannam (2002) for example studied Cairo as a modern, global city while she explored the influence of the government’s modernization projects had on its poorer citizens, and how they felt about the globalizing of the city. My research differs in that I study a lifeworld that is the result not of government policies but mostly of the lack of them. It nevertheless builds on Ghannam’s work by adding to her more general analysis of the everyday life of the poor in a modern, global environment a spatial analysis of the romantic. Anouk de Koning recently (2009) provided a spatial analysis of upper-middle class women and their everyday use of public space in Cairo, as she in a similar way explores how a cosmopolitan Cairo shapes the lives of its upper-middle class inhabitants, cosmopolitan being no more than yet another word for the global or neoliberal. The public spaces she explores are mostly semi-public upper-middle class cafés where women from that class feel safe enough to go out. De Koning further shows how these women fear the gaze of mostly lower-class men in the public space of the street. I draw on this idea to show how women from lower classes experience male gazes in the public space and use them in a positive way to find marriage partners. Male gazes at female bodies are more general related to thinking about the spatiality of the (female) human body, a spatiality that is central, as I will show, within the process of finding partners. Julia Elyachar (2005) worked on the influence of neoliberal policies on local informal markets, showing the embodiment of more

abstract notions such as free market within public sectors, how it destroys social capital and creates a moral economy particular to working-class neighborhoods. With moral economy Elyachar in this case does not refer to a just economy with utopian aspirations such as, for example, sustainable development etc, but rather a set of values citizens of poor neighborhoods live by to survive economically, values that influence not only the economic facets but all social aspects of neighborhood life as well. I use this idea to illustrate how the expectations that exist within Būlāq regarding, for example, young men's and women's appropriate behavior in relation to each other, influence their choice to meet outside their neighborhood, and that not living up to such expectations is economically not a viable option.

## **THEORETICAL CONCEPTS**

The importance of a spatial analysis begins with the fact that people are bodies and in space. Man is not a self floating through a space of the imagination (as Descartes' cogito did) that needed only time, but a self with a body: he is an embodied self or a lived body. That man is a lived body means he exists not only in time but also in space. Man's existence in space is dynamic, therefore Merleau-Ponty designates the spatiality of the human body has a *spatiality of situation*, as opposed to a *spatiality of position* which we find with non-human objects (1945). Perhaps we can say of things that they are *at* a certain place, while of men we say they live *in* a space.

The consolation of the gap between mind and body we find in philosophical works dating from as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century (from Spinoza and Kant, to Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) expanded on earlier phenomenological work by emphasizing the importance of man's embodiment over man's mind. Man for him is no longer a mind having a body, but a mind *being* a body. He primarily knows the outside world through bodily perception.

To admit that the self is an embodied self is as close to Merleau-Ponty as we will get here. For him the embodied self is one integrated whole. He is a two-parted self, as H.G. Mead (1962) calls it. A subjective I-self, hidden within the body, and an objective me-Self, visible to others. The objectivity of the Other we always see without hardship, while it is impossible to know the Other's subjectivity (cf. Sartre).

The space of the I-self is an inside space. When we speak of the self, don't we often refer to it as our *inner* self? The embodied self however is a visible self. It is a self with a body that perhaps is able to hide from the view of others in secluded inner spaces but is nevertheless out there. The body is itself an outside space, it is, in the words of Judith Butler, "a constitutive outside" (1993), while the I-self remains hidden within. Elizabeth Grosz (1994) in a similar manner sees the mind as an interior and the body as its exterior, and the two as inseparable from each other. The understandings about the value of sexual difference that prevail in a community at a certain moment construct particular gendered subjectivities based on this outside space of the body. The fact that it means something to have a female or male body, and what that means, is not inherent to that body itself, but is a concept of difference that a society inscribes in it by means of power relations that are (re)produced over time (cf. Butler 1993, Grosz 1994, Irigaray 1993). Gender therefore is something outside the individual human being, pertaining to the social (De Beauvoir 1949). For example, Virginia Woolf's Orlando, when she had magically become woman, was still the same person on the inside, but with a different body, so now she dressed different, acted different (she didn't have to restrain her tears and had to cover her ankles), and had a different legal status (wasn't allowed to own properties) all according to the values 18<sup>th</sup> century England allotted to a female body.

Men and women affect the spaces they act in; they first make them and then remake them day after day thus allotting each space with a meaning that they continue to remember and

according to which they consequently act. Social spaces are spaces that the social produces and reproduces. Henri Lefèbvre sees social space both an object and a process. He emphasizes throughout his work that space is a product of social action but at the same time also a process or a means through which these actions can take place. He calls it a “tool of thought and action” (Lefèbvre 1991, 26). One of the first sociologists to theorize social space was Georg Simmel (2009). He defines five of its qualities, namely: exclusivity, boundaries, fixity of social forms, proximity and distance, and mobility. According to Simmel, “every portion of space is unique,” and its boundaries demarcate a “world subject to its own norms, a world that is not drawn into the determinants and dynamics of the surrounding world” (2009, 549). He calls boundaries mental or sociological occurrences: boundaries exist first in our perception of them, before being physical things. He therefore considers space as “an activity of the mind” and society as a representation dependent on the individual consciousness. Social spaces are fluid and imaginary.

Gender roles, the activities women and men ought to perform in a group, produce social space and are produced by it (Massey 1994). As a result certain portions of space become exclusively male or female, while others are more neutral. Some spaces within Būlāq are male spaces, such as the mosques and roadside cafés, while others are female, like the market or the road a mother takes to bring her children to school. Once these portions have acquired this meaning they themselves influence the way men and women perform their activities. Since the beginning of Cairo’s revolutionary period in the year 2011 spaces inside and outside the neighborhood have gained a new meaning for young people in Būlāq as being male spaces not only at night, as they were previously, but during most parts of the day as well. People see them as dangerous for women and while young women would previously go and hold picnics in Tahrir Square now they return early to their houses, which in this way are once again reproduced as female spaces.

But, as Doreen Massey (1994) showed, spaces can have multiple identities, and the gendered meanings of space are not the only ones that inform people's daily behavior. Concepts such as interiority and exteriority and public and private are closely associated with and related to female and male identities of spaces, but are still (perceived) dichotomies that have a powerful influence on people's actions of their own.

When Bachelard wrote on the dialectics of outside and inside in 1958, he didn't mean to look at them as a geometric duality of division. Rather, he wished to go beyond "their simple reciprocity" (1994, 216) in order to reveal their "countless diversified nuances." According to him, the values of inside and outside are reversible and its geometry not fixed. Yet, Kingwell argues that "[c]onceptual contrasts are fundamental to human projects of sense-making" (Kingwell 2006, 277). We understand the everyday by drawing lines and making divisions; between proximity and distance, individuality and collectivity, public and private, interiority and exteriority and many more still. This logic of duality is as old as Platonic metaphysics and still crucial to our ability to grasp the world around us. Of course, with Bachelard we must say that the meanings of outside and inside are many, but we should not deny that there is a basic spatial distinction between interiority and exteriority as well, one perhaps that is relative rather than absolute in most cases but nonetheless real.

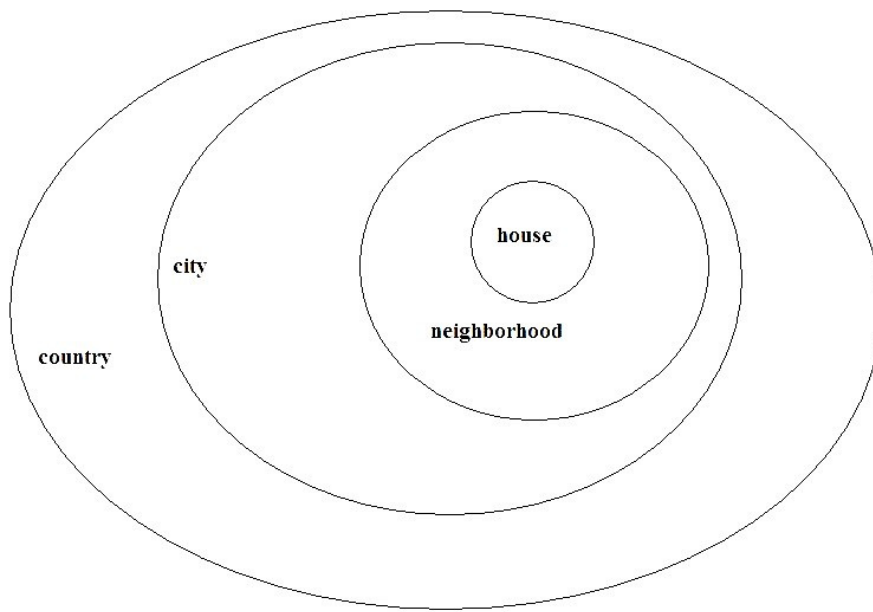
What do inside and outside mean? According to Mazzoleni (1993), "the distinction between 'inside' and 'outside'" is "the most elementary distinction of space". It is "the very distinction between the 'I' and the 'world'." If we suppose an empty world, an earth without anything built by human hands, where do we find inside? We find it within the boundaries that separate inside from outside, within the walls of caves. We find snails inside of their shells, fruit within its peel. Most of all, and the nearest to ourselves, inside refers to the self, the me, the subject. The subject resides within the boundaries of the body, hiding from the

outside world inhabited by Others, whose selves and subjectivities are hidden in their bodies and we cannot ever experience.

The inside is a space hidden from he who is outside. In a way the body is a building containing the self within, although this view would be contested by those who believe in the absolute unity of mind and body. The self creates other inside spaces around himself, and yet others around those, level after level. Each interior space shapes an outside space on the other side of its boundaries. When we call something outside, we imply that there is something inside of which the outside is excluded. The outside always surrounds an inside space.

Both spaces are separated by real or imaginary boundaries, that can be walls or agreements between the users of spaces. Inside and outside are clearly objective and absolute spatial values, but they are also utterly subjective and relative. Spaces can be inside or outside at one moment depending on different levels. When I compare my neighborhood to my house, I consider my house as an inside space and my neighborhood an outside space. However, if I compare my neighborhood to the city, suddenly the former turns from an outside space into an inside space compared to the rest of the city.

Based on my research I distinguish three levels of interiority and exteriority relevant for urban citizens. The primary level of interiority is the self of the individual human being, which has as its opposite the whole world outside himself, this is closely related with the inside space of the house. We find a second level of interiority in the neighborhood with outside of it the rest of the world. The neighborhood in many instances also serves as an outside space in comparison to the house. This ambiguous status has implications for people's romantic actions. Many of Bulāq's inhabitants perceive their neighbourhood as inside while they see - and literally call - the rest of the city outside. This city outside of the neighborhood is the third level of exteriority that is rare to take the meaning of an inside space.



The dialectic of interiority and exteriority is related to the concepts of public and private. In the modern era, the concept of public has become associated with spaces outside the house and private with inside. Scholars have often used the concepts of private and public to analyze a varied range of social and political phenomena. The debate about the public and private is central to feminist writing (Pateman 1988, Gavison 1992), and not in the least to studies about gender in the Middle East (Mernissi 1987, Abu Lughod 1986, Ghannam 2002). Farha Ghannam writes that “[l]ife in the Middle East has often been viewed in terms of a clear dichotomy between the private world of the woman and the public world of the man, such that men, seen as dominant and powerful, monopolize the public domain, while women, viewed as subordinate and powerless, are secluded and confined to the private sphere” (2002, 90). She argues however that this dichotomy isn’t useful for an analysis of women’s daily behavior in space, for while women indeed are excluded from some public spaces they do use others.

Besides the association of women with private spaces and men with public spaces and spheres, in the modern era, as we will see below, the concept of public has become associated

with spaces outside the house and private with inside spaces. This is not completely unfounded, but they are not the same. Whereas outside and inside are primarily spatial notions, public and private are social ones. The latter do only become spatial adjectives when we apply them to a particular space. It is important to realize that public spaces are different from public spheres.

In 1962 Jürgen Habermas published his influential book called *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. It was published into English in 1989, with the title *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. In the book Habermas explores how in the nineteenth century male members of the bourgeois class gathered to discuss public matters. Habermas, a German philosopher and critical theorist, wrote his book in order to explore how a democracy could arise again after National Socialism and the Nazis (Garnham 2007, 202). It stood at the beginning of an exploration and debate of the public sphere which is central to democratic and public realm theory. The basic meaning of the term public sphere is political. For Habermas the public sphere is a sphere where individual persons engage together in order to create influential opinions on political issues. “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public” (Habermas, 27).

Habermas, as the subtitle of his book says, writes about the bourgeoisian public sphere that existed at a particular time and place; in early modern Europe. He does not write about the public sphere in general nor about modern public spheres. Moreover, Habermas theorizes a *sphere* and not a *space*. It is important to make this distinction and to realize that the public sphere is not necessarily spatial in the way public space is. The German word *Öffentlichkeit*, that Habermas uses, contains, roughly, the English word ‘openness’, and contains neither the word sphere nor space.



We can understand the difference between public sphere and public space by defining what we mean when we use the terms public and private and to what we refer when we use the terms sphere and space. The public is something pertaining to a collective, it is open and related to a society. Nancy Fraser argues that publicity has four different senses. The public can mean “state-related”, “accessible to everyone”, “of concern to everyone”; and “pertaining to a common good or shared interest” (1990, 71). In the public sphere one deals with unknown people, whereas the private relates to known people and intimacy.

Public space is that kind of social space to which everyone can have equal access (cf. Gavison 1992). But, according to Lefèbvre, “public space is the product of competing ideas about what constitutes that space – order and control or free, and perhaps dangerous, interaction – and who constitutes the ‘public’.” This illustrates that the “everyone” for whom things public must be accessible according to its definition, is not absolute. Michael Warner defines a public as “a kind of social totality” (2002, 65). These totalities can be numerous, as groups can form opposing publics when they don’t want to be part of or are excluded from a certain public.

Counter-publics have been the subject of a rich literature since Habermas work. Rita Felski (1989), for example, was the first scholar to speak of a feminist counter-public sphere, and others have followed her since (cf. Fraser 1990, Asen and Brouwer 2000). The idea of a public space accessible to *everyone* is utopian. Rather, public spaces are accessible to all members of a *particular* public. In the perception of individuals who do not belong to this public the same space is not public. Therefore we can say that publicity and privacy exist on different scales. A café in a working class neighbourhood in Cairo is a public space, but in a limited sense because it is only accessible for a male public, which makes it semi-public while defining the space as a male space. Public and private spaces, as social space in general, are not passive objects but social products that are fluid in time. A public toilet becomes a private

space after an individual locks the door after entering. A taxi is a public space when open to passengers, but the same car turns into a private space during the leisure time of its owner when he and his wife use it on their way to the supermarket.

While Hanna Arendt sees the public sphere, or realm as irreducibly spatial (Villa 1992), we should not use the two terms interchangeably. For though it is true that every social action always takes place in space, and that when Habermas' private persons come together to speak about public affairs, they do so in space, the word "sphere" refers to something abstract and not something spatial. James Mensch defines public space as "the space where individuals see and are seen by others as they engage in public affairs" (2007, 31). Here it seems public sphere and space get mixed. A public space is indeed a space where individuals *can* see each other and be seen, and *can* engage in public affairs. A public space however exists no matter if the individuals who are in it engage in affairs belonging to the private or public sphere. For example, a recent law (6/8/2013) in Uganda stipulates that when three or more people want to discuss politics in public space they need to ask permission from the police. This again shows the ambiguous meaning of public spaces. More than the sort of activity, be it public or private, that one performs in them, it is the accessibility to a public that makes them public spaces. It is also not necessary that the individuals in a public space engage with each other in order for the space to be public. An individual, a private person, can very well walk *alone* in a public space, a street for example, and not be engaged in anything public. He may be having a private conversation with his girlfriend, and still be in a public space.

A private space does also not necessarily correspond with a private sphere, nor a public space with a public sphere. The private spaces of women's bodies forcedly belong to the public sphere when, for example, a community as the one in Būlāq prescribes that women must be virgin before marriage. Public affairs continuously enter private spaces as the house. For example when families watch a political debate on television, or when a father reads his

public newspaper in the private space of the living room, or when two sisters sit in front of him and discuss a recent demonstration. Private actions in their turn can take place in public spaces, take for example a couple whispering secret words while holding hands on a bus. Private affairs freely leave their supposed realm or sphere to intermingle with public ones. If we want to refer to a concrete space we must use the word that exists for it, that is “space”, to not permit any ambiguity.

While recognizable boundaries exist between public and private *space*, the difference between public and private *spheres* is less clear and sometimes contested. Hannah Arendt argues that “the modern rise of “the social” effaces what was once a strong distinction between the public and the private and tears down the boundary between the realms of necessity and freedom (1957, 33-49). The result is that the public sphere is “devoured” by “household” concerns and politics is reduced to the function of “household administration,” a function fulfilled by the state” (cited in Villa 2007, 712). In support of this idea Susan Gal (2002) shows how Soviet communists in the late nineteenth century, and in her example of Hungary in the early twentieth century, aimed to eliminate the private sphere and make the most intimate matters public through the expansion of state control. Interestingly, according to Doreen Massey (1994), it was mid-nineteenth century, slightly earlier and away from the continent, that the distinction between public and private spheres in England developed and the working man’s labour assigned him to the public sphere and women’s work confined her to “the private sphere of suburbs and the home” (233). In the Habermasian sense one could say that those working class men didn’t take part of the public sphere anymore than their wives did. Neither men nor women were involved in public affairs pertaining to the public sphere. This example illustrates again how important it is to distinguish between public spheres and public spaces. The latter is moreover more relevant to a spatial analysis of the everyday, because it indeed shows that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards married

women performed most of their activities in private spaces as they became responsible for housework, while men worked in the more public spaces of the mines (which were, in a way, private too as they were owned by capitalists).

As Ghannam showed, the dichotomy of public and private spaces doesn't cover all of social reality, and it isn't completely unambiguous. Yet the solution is not to set aside this dual way of categorizing, but to nuance it with, for example, spatial concepts such as inside and outside. I choose to focus on the perceived interiority and exteriority of spaces because these perceptions determine the behavior of people in Būlāq as much as the designations of public and private. Public space is by definition a space outside the home. Yet not all public spaces are outside spaces; one can easily think of a public library or townhouse. In the same way private spaces are not limited to inside spaces. Private spaces are all spaces to which only some individuals have access. When a couple from Būlāq goes to a park in Giza, they are outside and in a public space, but the space they create around themselves, while being outside is a private and intimate space.

Another example that shows the significance of using both the concepts of inside and outside and public and private is the following. One of my acquaintances in Būlāq always wears the veil when she leaves her house, and wears it inside the house in the presence of men who do belong to her direct family. When she goes to clean at my foreign male friends' houses, outside her neighborhood, she does not only unveil but also dress short clothing she would not wear in the street. Of course, the space of my friends' house wasn't public to her, but yet they were strangers and it wasn't a private space but a work environment. In this case the meaning of inside space is more significant than the meaning of public.

The neoliberal city produces an unbalance of public and private spaces (Harvey 2008). The rich take over many public spaces, such as gardens and playgrounds along the Nile, clubs, and make them inaccessible except with expensive memberships. Other spaces such as cinemas

and malls become increasingly private as the poor can't afford to go there. At the same time outside spaces as the street, bridges and parks and even cheap zoos become increasingly spaces of the poor as the rich don't go there because they see them as dangerous. These latter spaces are very important for young people to socialize and hang out. Their actions have, moreover, produced romantic spaces close to the living spaces of the rich, where they uphold their right to the city.

## **RESEARCH SITE**

Būlāq ad-Dakrūr is an informal, low-income neighbourhood on the west bank of the Nile river, in the Governorate of Gīza. With a population of 747 400 inhabitants in 2009 it is one of Cairo's most densely populated areas (according to the Giza governorate's website). It is adjacent to the formal neighbourhood of ad-Doqqī in the east, and the informal neighbourhoods of 'Arḍ al-Liwā' and Fayṣal on respectively the North and South.

Originally the area of Bulaq contained several villages that were separated from each other by rural grounds, their names were *Tabiq ad-Diyaba*, *Znin*, *Saft al-Labab*, *Bulaq ad-Dakrour*, *Ard al-Liwa*. Katkot, a 35 year old man from Bulaq, once told me while we were driving through the neighbourhood that when he was a child at school all the alleys and houses around us were still agricultural lands. The neighborhood has indeed rapidly expanded ever since the 80s with new buildings continuously being built on fertile ground. People who moved to Būlāq in the last twenty years either came from the countryside or other low income neighborhoods in the city in search of cheap housing.

Over the years, the rural grounds disappeared as did the mud built houses. New immigrants would buy farmers' land to buy houses for their families. This way the villages grew towards each other and Būlāq ad-Dakrour became one densely populated area. The neighborhood consists of a few main roads that connect to thousands of narrow, shadowy alleys. Recently

the alleys in the beginning of the neighborhood have been paved but besides these all streets are unpaved. Passers-by, tuktuks, minibuses, a few cars, sheep and other animals unceasingly from a slow moving crowd on the main streets. On the sides there are grocery stores, clothes shops and little restaurants. In front of them fruits and vegetable stands alternate with ping pong and pool tables surrounded by young boys, not to mention the piles of garbage that pop up every 50 meters. The buildings are four to six story- buildings offering housing to either extended or nuclear families in the form of small two room apartments.

One can reach the neighborhood on foot by one of the pedestrian bridges over the railroad tracks. Before one arrives at these crossing points from outside the neighborhood, space contracts as broader streets separate into narrow, crowded alleys leading to the stairs. Only one of the main streets in the neighborhood leads directly to the middle-class areas on the other side of the railroad tracks. The main users of this bridge are minibuses, as private cars or taxis don't often enter the neighborhood. Many a taxi-driver will protest by saying that he will "not go inside".

Bulāq is thus spatially isolated. However, this isolation does not prevent its inhabitants to daily cross the railroad tracks in order to go to work, school or places of leisure in other parts of the city. On the other side of *Kobri al-Kashab* is a formal neighborhood that was built in the 1950s. In this area tall buildings with large balconies stand along broad paved streets where cars drive. The backstreets are shadowy because of the thick lines of trees. There is one boulevard with a narrow park in the middle where people from the neighborhood love to go to walk, drink juice and sit on the benches. Young couples from the neighborhood go to the center of Cairo where they find several "romantic spaces" such as the Qasr al-Nīl bridge and the parks and lanes alongside the Nile on Zamalek. During the day these places are full of young couples who stroll along the river, lean on the balustrades of the bridge and take boat rides.

## METHODOLOGY

I first came to Būlāq three years ago when I was studying in Cairo as an undergraduate student. At that time I volunteered at a nursery in an adjacent neighborhood with many of my colleagues living in Būlāq and Imbaba. When one of them celebrated her birthday the other young women took me with them to attend her party. Their own excitement about my visit together with the warnings people had given me about the neighborhood made me feel rather intimidated when I first climbed the bridge over the railroad- tracks. I still remember how they didn't let go of my arm while we walked and placed me "safely" in the middle when we got on a *tuktuk*.

I soon went back many times and built friendships with several families in the neighborhood. In the beginning my friends still came to get me from the *Kobrī al-Khashab*, (the Wooden Bridge) but later I learned how to get to *at-Tabi'* and other areas by tuktuk or microbus by myself, an achievement about which my friends proudly spoke to their families as if I had indeed come from a different universe to a place rather difficult to penetrate.

When I years later told one of my friends from the neighborhood that I was going to conduct research about marriage she became excited. "Your professor wants you to write about engaged people in Bulaq?" she asked me. "But that's very easy! I can tell you all about it." I then tried to convince her of the intellectual level of my research and that it wasn't enough to speak only with her. "Don't worry," she said, "I'll help you and make you sit with everybody I know."

I spent many hours in the neighborhood, especially during my research in the spring of 2013. Though I didn't live there, I regularly spent days and nights at my friends' houses. I joined them to markets around the corner, helped to prepare food and clean the house, and watched children. Besides these everyday events I also visited many engagement and wedding parties, where I danced with brides surrounded by clapping women and had my arms painted

with henna. Young women were proud to show me their collections of wedding goods and new apartments. I joined them during visits to downtown to buy things or hang out and even when they went to Carrefour, a middle class shopping center, to buy a television for a to-be-married friend. I've also paid several visits to the romantic places in Cairo and spoken with the couples I encountered and sometimes just silently observed them enjoying the place.

The friends I had once met at the nursery introduced me to other people they knew. I also got to know new people from walking around in the neighborhood or chatting in minibuses and tuktuks. Once I explained the research I was doing to the owner of a shop which he immediately went to get a woman who was standing outside to talk to me and introduce me to others. She then proudly took me with her to her friends while her little son was running behind us. In the end I got to know about ten different families and spoke with around 30 individuals. The conversations I had with them were always informal. I asked questions while we were drinking tea or preparing food. Many of the women loved to tell stories about their own engagement and the early years of their marriage, and those women whom I've known for years didn't hesitate to tell me many personal accounts.

I also spoke with men. One evening we all sat chatting in the bedroom at a family's house while the children were showing off how well they could dance on the bed when I asked my friends' husband about the process of engagement within the neighborhood. He was happy to help and made me go get a paper and pen to write everything down. Overall though the conversations I've had with men were never as intimate as those I had with women. Many young men I met would be more interested in marrying me than in speaking about marriage. As a woman I always had more access to female space like the house than I had to male spaces like cafés.

## **RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**



The aim of my research is to offer an insight in the use and role of space in the dating and marriage process among young people from Bulāq ad-Dakrou. <sup>1</sup> I explore how engaged and newly-wed women and men act within the inside spaces of their home and neighborhood and the outside spaces in other parts of the city. I will explore ways in which they create social spaces through their actions and how space influences their behavior. My focus lies on practices of finding a partner, the engagement, and establishing a household. This thesis furthermore focuses on how use of space changes for both women and men after their marriage. I chose to study young adults between 18 and 30 because people in this age group are most active in engaging and performing expectations of gender roles. For many young people this is their first marriage, and concepts such as romance and intimacy feature centrally in their decisions and behaviors.

## **CHAPTER OUTLINE**

I have divided in my thesis in three parts along three important spatial divisions: the city, the neighborhood and the house. I start with showing how the outside spaces within the upper middle class areas of the neoliberal metropolis are spaces of possibility and opportunity for young men and women first because they provide a setting for initial encounters and subsequently for whether or not secret “dates” during the engagement. The use of these spaces is related closely with the increased mobility of young women from the neighborhood, who mostly work, go to school and take part in leisure activities outside their neighborhood. I will show how this has resulted in new forms of meeting, including a decline arranged marriages and marriage among family members and new sorts of engagements, that have become more like short-term relationships in the viewpoint of men and more about romance.

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<sup>1</sup> In my thesis I use fictional names for the people in my sample , except for those who wanted me to use their own name.

In chapter three I demonstrate how the neoliberal city produces and stigmatizes spaces and neighborhoods of the “poor”. I argue that the ways such a neighborhood collectively chooses to represent itself before the ever-judging eye of the rest of the city result in a moral economy that regulates values of respectability, chastity and decency within the neighborhood. The latter thus becomes an important site for the production of female and male subjectivities that live up to a wide spectrum of expectations also, and perhaps especially, in relation to marriage and sexuality. I show how for young couples secrecy and privacy are essential tools to safeguard their reputation within the community.

Finally I explore the micro politics of the house and focus on how the transition to marriage causes struggles about territory and personal spaces within the house along with the continuous (re)production of gendered identities of home spaces. Moreover the perception of the house as a female space within both the neighborhood and the society at large has drastic consequences for the daily life of the young married woman who only recently was often successful in negotiating her “right to the city”. Most women experience a change not so much by the designation of the house as female, but mostly by understandings of the non-house as a “non-married woman space”. Authoritarian husbands are only partly responsible for the creation of such understandings, prevalent ideas within the neighborhood community, as well as housework are powerful retainers of activities in the city as well. As we will see, not all women are as willing to live up to these new expectations. Some prevent having to do so by choosing “easy” husbands others by secret behavior and compromises after their marriage.

## CHAPTER 2

### MEETING IN THE CITY: SPACES OF SEEING, SECRECY AND ROMANCE

Our analysis of engagement and courting and its spaces could only start outside. If the project of marriage evolves within the house, where husband and wife build their own family, it most certainly begins in the spaces outside the house and neighbourhood. Here man and woman catch each other's attention for the first time. A girl might "be seen" by her prospective fiancée while walking through the street in her neighbourhood, or even while standing outside on the roof of her house. It is outside too that young men and women secretly meet, seek privacy in one of Cairo's parks, or find romance walking alongside the Nile. The outside spaces of the city are spaces where they go out to get to know each other better once engaged. Spaces of courting and engagement for young people in Būlāq ad-Dakrūr are outside spaces.

Young people from Būlāq have access to a large urban space outside their own neighborhood which they can use to find marriage partners themselves instead of following traditional marriage patterns such as arranged marriages by parents. I first discuss the importance appearance of the self within partner finding patterns in Būlāq. After this I show how the mobility of young women changes interpretations of engagements and creates opportunities of being together in the city. Finally I address how couples create and reproduce romantic spaces in the city.

#### **FINDING A MARRIAGE PARTNER**

"He saw me and he liked me."

One evening, when the electricity finally had returned after two hours, Ayman, the husband of one of my friends, listed the different ways in which men and women from Bulāq find suitable marriage partners.

“*Fī kaza ḥāga*”, he started.

“There are several things. First, a boy sees a girl and if she pleases him he follows her. He follows her everywhere but without her seeing him. He checks where she lives, he asks her neighbors about her, and if she is in college he follows her there. All this he does to find out if she is a good girl (*ṭayyiba*) and not engaged. Then he goes to her father. First he will send his sister or mother to meet with her sister or mother in their house, and then there will be a second meeting when he and his parents will go to meet with her and her parents in their house.”

“They can also be relatives or know each other through mutual friends or at a wedding. But when they don’t know each other they cannot meet. It’s scandalous (*‘ēb*) for a girl to talk with a man she doesn’t know.”

“Or, for example, they study or work together and they already know each other. Then he can tell her he likes her. If she likes him she will tell her mother that there is somebody who likes her and then he and his parents will come to visit them. But if not she tells him she is engaged or in a relationship.”

I asked him if it’s possible for a woman to ‘see a man’ and ‘like’ him, but this wasn’t the case. “Maybe ‘*andako*, among you (foreigners), or among rich people the women can say that they like a person but in the *sha‘bi* (popular) neighborhoods it’s not possible.”

“So if a woman is very in love with a man she can’t tell him? Or she can’t let her friends tell his friends or something like that?”, I tried. But this almost seemed an offensive suggestion. “She can do it but of course he does not have to accept something like that,” he replied.

In order to marry one needs to find a marriage partner, or in other words: “mating requires meeting” (Kalmijn and Flap 2001, 1289). A great deal of scholarship on mate selection in the city focuses on questions about whether marriages in cities are endogamous and homogenous or not, and what preferences marriage candidates have about their partner. Scholars have studied cities in most parts of the world, such as, for example, Europe (Moreels and Matthijs 2012, Van de Putte et al. 2007, Rogoff Ramsøy 1966), South America (Schvaneveldt and Hubler 2012), North America (Fisman 2006, Kennedy 1943), and the Middle East (Sherif-Trask 2003, Hoodfar 1997). Bahira Sherif-Trask discusses how young people from middle class families in Cairo meet each other. She focuses on the romantic aspects of these meetings and does not engage in a spatial analysis.

Partner selection preferences are rather similar worldwide. According to Buss men all over the world “place a premium on physical appearance” (1994, 245). His research, held among 10,047 people from 37 cultures, shows that a woman's appearance is more significant than her intelligence, her level of education or even her original socioeconomic status in determining the mate she will marry (249). For the long term partner, women stress the importance of men’s “willingness and ability to invest resources” (249) while men besides the woman’s appearance emphasize “paternity certainty, partner number and reproductive capacity.”

Social control can be influential in the decision making. Parents and other family members approve and disapprove of candidates. Sometimes they are the ones arranging marriages among relatives or acquaintances. Interestingly, the urban environment of Cairo offers contemporary youth possibilities of encounters that have changed patterns of partner selection in Bulāq. During the 1970s and 1980s most engagements in the neighborhood during were still arranged by parents (Hoodfar 1997). Hoodfar noted a preference for arranged marriages based on kinship followed by marriages among neighbors (1997, 55, 56). When I spoke with an older lady who came to live in the area when she married about 40 years ago, she told me

that arranged marriages were much more old fashioned and common perhaps in the 1930s and earlier but no longer in the 1970s and afterwards. Perhaps a difference among inhabitants with an urban background and those with a rural background can account for these dissimilar findings.

In my sample however almost all couples had met and chosen each other themselves. In some cases they were cousins or neighbors who had already met each other in families' houses and in the neighbourhood. For example, some of the couples I spoke with had played together in their street while they were kids. But in most cases in my sample the man had seen a woman somewhere outside or inside the neighborhood, at her workplace or school. In fact, I recognized a pattern in the stories people in Bulāq told me. It comes down to men "seeing and liking" women on the street before asking their parents for her hand to be engaged. Literally a sort of "love on first sight", however always one the man initiates and without directly involving love. More detailed it goes as follows: A man sees a woman, follows her, and, if he likes her, proposes, and if she and her family accept him they get engaged. For the woman the initial encounter in such cases is passive. She is seen and followed while the man sees and follows.

This corresponds to Gillian Rose (1993) argument that women are embodied in space while men have a perceived "freedom of the body" and actively gaze at women and thus objectify them in space. The public space this becomes a space where women are subject to male gazes. (De Koning 2009, 546).

The threatening masculine look materially inscribes its power onto women's bodies by constituting feminine subjects through an intense self-awareness about being seen and about taking up space . . . [I]t is a space which constitutes women as embodied objects to be looked at (Rose 1993:145–146).

Whereas De Koning describes how for upper middle class women the male gaze "figured as an active polluting and defiling agent" (546), for the women in my sample that same gaze

embodied them in space too but they had a much more positive understanding of this event by seeing it as a sort of chance to display oneself for a future husband. This is Rahma's story (21), who now has been married for 1,5 years and has been pregnant for six months.

“He saw me and liked me so he kept on walking behind me and followed me to my house, of course I was calling him names in the beginning. Then he proposed and we got engaged. It took only one month and then we married.”

Why had she first called him names? “Bosi (look) ”, she said, “in Egypt when a woman calls a man names she shows that she is respectful”. The upper-middle class women perceived the gazes as threats that “were crucially connected to the presence of non-uppermiddle- class others, those who were perceived to be of a lower “social” or “cultural level” (De Koning 2009, 546), but lower class women had their own ways of dealing with male attention: no looking back, never talking to them (or in case they keep following only to call them names). When I joined some of them on outings and received comments of men in English, they were always quick to make up witty comments to scream back (“tell him the Prophet is Arabic”), but they never really did so. This way they made sure to preserve their respectability, but also to perhaps catch the attention of a man who may later turn out to be a suitable marriage candidate. No man, the women in my sample made me believe, would want to marry a woman who had engaged freely with him in the street by looking back and answering his courtship.

For one thing, this pattern shows that the appearance of the girl is crucial in attracting the attention of male marriage partners in outside and public spaces, while her background and reputation among her neighbors are decisive for her suitor to consider her a suitable marriage partner. The first encounters between men and women from Būlāq and their future partners take place in certain spaces of the city. The general importance of women's appearance in men's mating choice implies that there is a spatial aspect to forms of mating selection in many cultures, be it real or virtual. Do we not always encounter the Other's appearance in space?

Unmarried men and women meet each other *somewhere*. Social spaces thus are spaces of seeing and being seen.

### **THE APPEARANCE OF THE SELF**

The self appears in space through its embodiment. He does so not simply by *having* a body, but by *being* a body in a particular way. Ways of appearing are, for example, the wearing of certain clothes, hairstyles or tattoos, but also the acting according to specific patterns, and the possession of things that function like extensions of the self. The I-self in outside public spaces hides himself from the eye of Others behind dress and etiquette behavior. What he shows to Others through dress and actions is himself as an object me-self. Mead shows how individuals can create many me-selves by taking up different roles throughout the day (Rose ed. 1962). The embodied self is perhaps to the inner I what the house is to the individual. It hides the I but it also establishes its identity. Rose argues that “by appearing, the person announces his identity, shows his value, expresses his mood, or proposes his attitude” (Rose ed. 1962, 101). Dress and accepted behavior make one merge into a social group and not stand out but at the same time show ones identity as being member of a certain group. It is remarkable that even though the self is supposedly a unique and private phenomenon the embodied self often tries to act and look as much as the ones he identifies with as possible. Simmel calls this the simultaneous social tendencies towards “individual peculiarity” and “social equality” (Simmel 1971, 306).

Olivier Marc however calls the consciousness and the self “above all collective” (69). According to him, “to have a self is in fact to be conscious of being a drop of water in the middle of the ocean” (69). Of course each conscious drop of water would protest when accused of being identical to all others; to be nothing particular. “I am I!” he would say: “I’m an identifiable drop”.



## DRESS

“(...) *the subject of dress is one of intense and paramount importance.*” (Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 240.)

“The urban world puts a premium on visual recognition. We see the uniform which denotes the role of the functionaries and are oblivious to the personal eccentricities that are hidden behind the uniform. We tend to acquire and develop a sensitivity to a world of artefacts and become progressively farther removed from the world of nature.” (Wirth 1938, 14).

Dress is an important part of the embodied self in general. Man uses dress to construct an identity, to play a role: to show himself. Yet with dress he only shows that side of himself or that self (that Me, for a person can have multiple me's according to Mead) he wants or needs to show within a particular society and in a specific space. It shows an object me-self or collective identity. We say that dress has symbolic value and is part of the language of interaction. Not only uniforms of nurses, school children, policemen etc. convey a clear meaning of an individuals' role but normal everyday clothes do too.

Rose (1962) argued that “whenever we cloth ourselves, we dress “toward” or address some audience whose validating responses are essential to the establishment of our self” (102). It is true that the policeman and the soldier tell their audiences “I am soldier” and “I am policeman”. In the same way the dress of an Egyptian adolescent man from Bulāq or any other neighbourhood tells that he comes from a certain class and identifies with a particular group to whoever he may encounter who speaks the language of his clothes.

Dress not only reveals, but also conceals. By clothing oneself identical to other members of one's group an individual becomes invisible. One can have a personal style of clothing but there are always others who dress the same way. Dress permits the individual to take on the collective identity of a subgroup while his private identity remains hidden within the inner space of the body. Simmel writes that fashion satisfies both “the need of union on the one

hand and the need of isolation on the other” (301). Cavallaro and Warwick similarly argue that dress “both defines and de-individualizes” (2001, xvi).

Elisabeth Wilson calls dress “the frontier between the self and the non-self” (1989, 3). It is, I think, the outside fortification of a building that hides both the body and inner self within. That building however is part of the self too. It is its outside façade showing passers-by the image it wants them to see. The example of the *niqāb*, a long garb Muslim women from different social and national backgrounds wear that covers the whole body except for the eyes, is particularly illustrative in this context. While it literally serves to not only hide ones inner self but also ones’ face, it at the same time reveals a person’s collective identity of being a woman that belongs to a certain social group. If I encounter two strangers, one wearing a *niqāb*, and one woman not wearing one, I would not know more about the covered woman than I would about the other one. I can relate the face of the first woman as little to a name as I can the face of the second. In a mass of strangers, clothing reveals the me-self as much as it conceals the I-self.

But all these ways of appearing I have now discussed are not merely the individual’s choice. Powerful discourses within societies hold up expectations about the way a person must live his body. Thus in Būlāq men and women need to act and dress in a certain way in order to continue to be part of the neighborhood community. A young woman from Būlāq carefully dresses up when she goes out. She covers her hair with a colorful veil, puts on jeans and anything long sleeved on it that ideally reaches her legs. This way she makes sure that she doesn’t upset her parents and brothers while not looking any different than other women her age, not worse in style, not less well-cared for, but not too well-cared for either to not be too provocative and not to protrude. She is not only hiding her hair and body to be decent but also hiding her inner self. At the same time a woman is also showing that part of her identity she

wants others to see. Her dress speaks the words: Look, I'm a young respectful, unmarried woman from this particular class. I'm not elite, but not too *sha'bi* either.

Dress is strongly related to space and the levels of its interiority and exteriority and publicity or privateness. Dress is one of the clearest indicators of the perception of interiority or exteriority of space among Bulāq's inhabitants. The dress of adolescent women in Bulāq depends on space and the people they are with. Hoodfar noticed already over twenty years ago that "[i]n the *haya sha'biya*, the folk or popular neighborhood, there was also a sharp distinction between what was worn at home and in the neighborhood and what people wore outside the immediate neighborhood or for special occasions such as weddings" (Hoodfar 1997, 197).

Women wear different clothes for each different level of inside or outside and of course for different events as well. They dress up in what they call "normal" clothes for trips outside the neighborhood, to Mohandeseen or to work. Even when she only needed to go to a post office which happens to be outside, in Gīza, Ishraa thought carefully about what to wear the day before. But as soon as she got home she took everything off and dressed in some house clothes, even though she knew she still had to go get milk and breakfast outside. To do this she put on a black 'abāya. This is a common pattern. When they leave the house to do something in the neighborhood the girls and many married women put on a black 'abāya over their house-clothes.

I saw other women though who wear the 'abāya all the time, and others again who switch between normal clothes and nice 'abāya's. I asked them about it but opinions differed. According to Marwa, a 24-year old from Bulaq, women who wear 'abāya's are from a lower class. "The women in 'abāya's wear them because they like it, but they are very *sha'bi* (popular)." But her sister Walaa (25) did not approve.

“No!” she said, “she’s giving you wrong information. Anyone can wear it but for example when you need to get something you forgot or do something in the neighborhood. And you know in the Gulf women always wear ‘abāya’s.”

For young women in Bulāq an ‘abāya means a garment you wear when you go outside the home but inside the neighborhood without *meeting* people from outside the neighbourhood (strangers, but most people within the neighborhood are strangers too) or *doing* something with social significance like attending a birthday, wedding or going on an outing. According to Hoodfar “there was strong social pressure to conform to the dominant style of dress in the neighborhood, to reduce visible social differences” (1997, 197).

In general people tend to conform their clothes to the social group they are part of or to the role they are playing. The clothes they wear in the neighborhood are cheaper and quicker, they don’t need much time to think about. Because outside clothes are expensive they seem to save them for necessary occasions, while that pressure does not exist within ones neighborhood. Many people spend less time thinking what to wear on a quick walk to the supermarket around the corner than what to wear to work on school.

Hoodfar also says that “on leaving the neighborhood people were expected to change clothing to demonstrate their social and ideological position vis-à-vis the wider society.” However, by dressing as western and “normal” as they can both men and women from the neighborhood try not to show their social position but to not stand out in the mass or just make a nice and representative impression.

## **THE CITY AS MARRIAGE MARKETPLACE**

A popular Egyptian song played on most weddings and parties in and outside Bulāq is called *Sūq al-Banāt*, which literally translates as “The Girls Market”. Part of the soundtrack of the movie *Shāria’ Ḥaram* (Haram Street) and sung by Mahmoud al-Lithi, it speaks of a man

looking for a woman to marry. In the song he lists the characteristics the ideal woman possesses, ranging from being white and pretty to taking good care of her husband. While his mother had advised him to look for girls at university he thinks those are *banāt farāfīr*, “spineless girls.” He preferred those who are “from the people” (*baladī*), and “original” (*aṣīla*). The song conveys the idea that partner finding is an activity for men, who choose women based on their looks and further qualities of background and servitude. Moreover, the singer talks of a “market of girls” which as we will see is for many people in Būlāq much less of an abstract image than it may sound. When the initial encounter between young men and women places such importance on women’s (and men’s) appearance, the question we must answer now is where do these men and women appear to each other? From the stories people told me, it appeared that the whole city is like a big market where men can see and choose women. Women in my sample often told me their husband had seen them somewhere in the neighbourhood. A woman I met used to live across her future husband and he could see her while she was standing on the roof of her house. They would communicate with gestures until he came to her house to propose to her father. This example supports the argument that “[p]roximity makes frequency of interaction easier and therefore increases the chances of contacts that lead to long-term relationships” (Niedomysl et al. 2010, 1120).

At Salma’s (17) *tangīd* I asked the mother of her fiancée how they had met. She eagerly started to tell me the story. They were on a wedding in the neighborhood “like this one” and Salma was sitting next to her mother. She was “looking very nice”.

“Then we wanted to find out who she was and if her family was there. So we went to talk to them. I said: my son is interested in marrying her. Then they said give us a week to think. We waited for a week and then they told us we could come! And we went and they read the *fathā* and that’s how they got engaged.”

But the rest of the city is as important for initial encounters. While some women spend a lot of time in their own neighborhood many cross the tracks daily to go to school or work. Mervat (26) met her husband during their studies:

“We were together in the institute. You know an institute, like a university, and he liked me. I was very surprised when he told me and very shy. Then he went to propose to my mother. After that we were engaged for three years. We would go out all the time. To the cinema, to the zoo, to the park, we go walk in Downtown or to a café. Or we went to eat in a restaurant.”

Another woman used to work in a shop in Mohandeseen where her future husband “spotted her and liked her”. He then used to come to the shop and buy things while making conversation. After they agreed on their engagement problems arose between the two because the fiancée didn’t want his fiancée to work in the shop anymore because she talked with too many men there. She nevertheless kept working because she needed the money, but he made sure she stopped working as soon as they got married. Even public transportation is a space of meeting partners. Hana is from a neighborhood on the other side of Cairo and told me her husband, who was from Būlāq, saw her in the metro. He then followed her home to find out who she was and after that they got engaged. The following account belongs to Gihan:

“I had a girl friend who lived in his [her fiancée’s] street. And when I went to visit her he saw and liked me and he wanted to talk to me but I was too shy. So then he told her brother who was his friend that he liked me and he told his sister and she told me. She said he wants to get engaged with you but I said I first want to know what he is like, if he is a good person and what he looks like. So then we decided to meet. In Gīza. I used to work in Ma’ādī and when I came from the bus he was waiting and we went to sit in the park. He told me that he liked me and asked me about my family. But I was too shy to say anything, I only gave answers. Then we decided he had to visit my mother.”

These stories clearly show how central women’s ability to use spaces outside their neighborhood is to the current system of partner finding. Women’s presence in public spaces

in Cairo has been reason for debate during much of the twentieth century (for a literature review see De Koning 2009). In Cairo women's presence in public leisure spaces is a "major marker of cosmopolitan or "westernized" elite practices" (De Koning 2009, 541; Abaza 2001). But this must not give the impression that women from low-income areas do not go to such places because it's inappropriate for them to be there. The places De Konings speaks about in her article are uppermiddle-class coffeeshops with prices that make the reason for these women's absence much more an economic one. Moreover, cheaper global leisure places such Macdonald's are popular among these women to go eat icecream (they sell them for 5 pounds, and they provide access to the restaurant and its small, but free playgrounds for children). And while in their own neighborhood women's presence in "public" cafés isn't appreciated, in Downtown they do not mind to go drink tea (2 pounds) in one of the cafés ("because those are for tourists anyway"). Now and then they love to visit remote elite shopping centers and malls just to watch the stores (they come by metro and microbuses instead of private cars), as uninvited guests in a space that was never invented or meant for them, to watch their richer fellow city-dwellers buy western fashion clothes.

So, even though most of them have strict curfews (*mawā'id*) at sometimes as early as six or seven PM, young women from Būlāq are nothing less present in public spaces, and perhaps one could argue, present even more. The upper and upper middle class women saw the outside spaces in the city, the street, parks, as dangerous and went by car "from one safe space to the next" (De Koning 2009, 549), afraid to take microbuses. But these perceived unsafe spaces never seemed to fill the young women in my sample with fear (though their parents, husbands and brothers were afraid for them). A group of young female friends I knew never hesitated to jump on another crowded bus and occupy a few seats in the back while talking loudly, once time to visit the mosque of Hussein, next to go watch shops in Downtown Cairo. With relatively cheap means of transportation abound much of the cities' public spaces

were within reach. They enjoyed outings outside their neighborhood, walking around through Mohandeseen's tree shaded streets on their way home after work, or strolling through Zamalek on their free Fridays (when they passed by, perhaps, the women from De Koning's research who sat "safely" behind the glass of coffeeshops, to which they couldn't afford entrance), and once held a photoshoot of themselves in front of the Nile when they crossed a bridge on their way home.

Of course, they themselves weren't ignorant of the real threats men could form for women alone at night, especially "after the revolution" and they avoided going to Downtown as long as there were "things going on". Moreover their right to city was something they continuously had to negotiate. Spaces outside the neighborhood were accessible only during the day (one friend told me how she sometimes lied waiting when she couldn't sleep to run off at sunrise to walk through the city), or after extensive negotiation at evenings too, depending on the occasion and the company. For example, I once worked with a group of unmarried women in their early twenties. After work, in Mohandeseen, they were supposed to go to English class but because it was Thursday and they had just met me they wanted to take me out. They used the time they were allowed to be from home at night according to their own planning. We were to go "chill" in Downtown and to go there we all took a microbus. One of them however didn't cease to look anxiously out of the window because one of her uncles might see her. I myself felt excited because of my first time in a microbus driving in high speed with open doors and said: "if my father would see me", only meaning that he would find the situation amusing. The other women however finished my sentence by exclaiming laughing: "he would kill you, right!"

The outside space for young women from Bulāq is not a space one should be without permission. They were however remarkably creative in negotiating their presence in outside spaces. For example, Nada once told me that she could meet me in Downtown, if I wanted, so



that I didn't need to come all the way to her house, "I will tell my family I have to go to the doctor", she said, "but we have to meet early like around 8 am". Lying is accepted if it serves save oneself the anger of a father, mother or brother, "I'm on my way home but the road is packed with cars", says a young woman to her father when she is still on her way to go drink a juice with friends; "I'm home and sick" another whispers to a fiancée who must not know of an outing to the countryside.

### **SPACES OF SECRECY**

Whether carefully negotiated or not, access to the city proves convenient when young people want to secretly meet each other. The space outside the neighborhood is not only a space for men to find women or for women to be found, it is also a space to secretly meet before or during an engagement. Before she got engaged, Marwa (24) went to see her to-be-lover a couple of times after her work. She worked close to the *Gam'at ad-Dewal*, a large avenue close to Bulāq, and there they met after her work. It was extremely secret. I remember I wanted to go to her house one day to meet her family. Normally we would have walked together, but this time she told me she couldn't because her uncle came to get her with his scooter. Her colleagues, who were her close friends, told me she was going to meet a guy. Later that evening, at her house, I asked Marwa if this was true but she denied everything because her mother was sitting in the same room. Afterwards she confirmed it to me and they indeed got engaged several months later.

Another example we find in Gihan's story. Her mother had met her suitor but didn't agree yet on an engagement.

"My mom decided he was a good person but she said "her father will not agree when you don't have money and are still in the army". So he had to finish the army first before we could get engaged. So then we continued to meet in secret. We didn't have mobile phones so we made up a sign. When he called on our house phone and hang up three times I would know it was him and pick up. Then

we would agree to meet for example to walk alongside the Nile, or to go to Hussein. When I went to buy clothes at Taḥrīr he would come with me. He also had a friend with a shop who had a phone and said I could call him there at like seven or eight at night. Then after that year we got engaged.”

“And within the neighbourhood you never met?” I asked her.

“No! Suppose one of my brothers or sisters would have seen me! And where would we sit? We always went to the Nile or Taḥrīr, or after the metro was ready we used to go to whatever neighbourhood and walk around. Drink something cold, you know, *nitfassah* (go out).”

## **BEING TOGETHER WITH STRANGERS**

“The city, whatever else it may be, is a world peopled in large measure by strangers. It is a place where people are continually brought together who do not, and, in most cases will never, know one another at all. It is a place where, on its sidewalks and in its parks, on its buses and subways, in its restaurants and bars and libraries and elevators, in its depots and terminals, people are surrounded by persons whom they do not know and with whom their only basis of relationship is that they happen to occupy the same territory at the same time” (Lofland 1972, 93-94).

The secrecy and anonymity young men and women find in the spaces outside the neighborhood are partly caused by distance. The places they use to meet each other are relatively far from their family’s house and street. This distance is even enhanced by the contrast between their own neighborhood and the rest of the city. Once one crosses the bridges over the train tracks, one leaves the own neighborhood with its watching neighbors out of sight.

It is this distance that guarantees that the spaces outside the neighborhood are spaces of anonymity. The more outside one goes, the farther away from one’s house, the more strangers one will encounter. We can say therefore that being in outside spaces is being together with strangers. A stranger in the basic meaning of the word is a person one does not know. He is anonymous. He does not belong to any of the social groups an individual is part of himself. This makes him different than ourselves and a sort of super-Other. While members of a social

group, such as the inhabitants of a neighborhood or street, the workers in a company, or children in a school can form what Sartre calls a We-subject, the stranger is always part of the them-objects. He is an outsider.

Strangeness too exists on scales. Strangers living in our city are less strange maybe than those from cities far away, and all strangers living in our country may be less strange compared to foreigners. A different meaning of the word stranger is someone acting or looking different than others. In the case of Bulāq and its outside spaces the meaning of stranger as an unknown person is more important. The people one does not know even inside the neighborhood may still look and act like oneself, because people often try not to stand out.

Simmel writes that: “The stranger is close to us insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people” (1974, 147).

In the city one can become a “stranger in the midst of strangers” (Lofland 1985, 19). Among them, one does not only not know others but others also do not know oneself. Outside one’s neighborhood therefore one can disappear in a mass of strangers without standing out. This mass is not a homogenous mass, but there are similarities that matter, such as women’s decent dress, or common behaviour in transportation and on the street. These similarities give each stranger the opportunity to appear as a stranger, a person one does not know.

The space outside Bulāq is a space of anonymity which gives opportunities to go out and act freely, but this advantage we must not exaggerate. The outside space is not only inhabited by strangers. In the mass in which one can disappear one can also encounter acquaintances.

One late afternoon a group young colleagues ran off after work to go Downtown. As long as they were near Būlāq some of them were anxious about the possibility of family members seeing them. But once they arrived in Downtown they got *koshary* and sat down in the middle

of *Tahrir* square, which was still empty and covered with grass before the revolution. Here they were more secure because they felt that no family members would see them. They had created their own space of leisure right in the middle of the city while cars were rushing on around them, where they could freely hang out with each other and enjoy their free time.

For engaged couples and secret lovers- the outside space of anonymity and strangers is one of opportunity and possibilities. Here they can secretly meet, be together and even hold hands or more without their relatives or acquaintances watching them. While these are public spaces and there are many other people around them, couples do find ways to create intimate private spaces around themselves. Once they sit down in a park and only pay attention to each other one feels almost like intruding into their romantic private space by merely looking at them. Outside spaces thus become spaces of seeing and being seen, romance, secrecy and intimacy.

For some couples the anonymity and secrecy of outside spaces create environments of possible intimacy. Intimacy is for most women in the neighborhood something beyond the limits. When I asked Mervat if she thought people left their own neighborhood and went to a park or to the Nile to be able to hold hands or be close to each other her answer was confirming but she was quick to reassure me that she would never do such a thing herself. The aversion showed on her face while she said:

“Yes! If you go to the park or to the Nile you see them hug and kiss and sit close to each other! It’s a lack of manners! Those women are not raised well. Ahmed never held my hand in public, maybe if we crossed a street he would hold my sleeve. And he watched me very well, did not let anybody come close or say anything. I only liked to go out with him because I was happy to see him again and to talk with him and to get to know him better.”

Indeed, during the engagement some women seem to need the anonymity of outside spaces more than others. I had a conversation with Dina who now has been married for two years. She met her husband in the institute, he was from Faisal and she is from Bulāq. After they got

engaged they would go out outside Bulāq regularly, but, according to her, that was not a matter of seeking privacy.

“I would go out in Bulāq, but here there are no cafeteria to sit or a park to walk in. If I lived in Mohandeseen I would go out in my own neighborhood.”

I asked her if she wouldn’t be afraid that her family saw them together. “Afraid why?”, she responded, “my brother knew, because we were engaged. If for example we weren’t engaged I would be afraid all the time and look around me constantly to see if there was anybody there.”

Dina’s message clearly was that engaged people do nothing wrong when they go out together. That is, if brothers, fathers and uncles agree. When I spoke to her mother however she told me that women are not supposed to go out with their fiancées until they are legally married. They should only meet each other when her family is with her. A young engaged woman I spoke with in Bulāq told me she never went out with her fiancée but only met him at her house, while her father was there.

For some the engagement offers the ability to freely go out with a guy, for others it still doesn’t. The space outside the neighborhood thus gets different meanings for different women. During the stage of courting it is a space of secrecy, but it remains a space of secrecy for those who are not allowed to see their fiancées alone during their engagements.

Spaces of secrecy do only exist in the real city, but also in cyberspace. Almost all young people I spoke with, men and women, had accounts on Facebook. Women’s accounts are often anonymous with fake names and they seldom show pictures of themselves. While they use their accounts to stay in contact with their fiancées, I do not know if they use these to get in touch with strangers. Young men on the other hand often seem to enjoy having foreign female friends they didn’t know in real life.

## **SPACES OF ROMANCE**

Walking over the Qasr al-‘Aini bridge that links Downtown with Zamalek one has a beautiful view on the Nile where *falouka*’s raise their sails in the wind, and high hotels rise up on the riverbanks. The bridge is old, built between 1931 and 1933 and inaugurated by King Fuad. Two large statues of lions guard the entrance on both sides. Robin Wright calls the bridge “a charming setting for an inexpensive date” (Wright 2012, 22). Indeed, this is not an ordinary bridge: it is the most romantic bridge in Cairo and is also known as “lover’s bridge”. It is one of the favorite romantic spaces in the city many engaged couples chose to exclusively enjoy each other and the environment.

Haitham Sa‘ied, an Egyptian singer and actor born in 1984, made a video clip in 2009 with the bridge as its setting. The song is called “*Homa malhom binā ya Lēl*” (“What do they have to do with us”). In the clip Sa‘ied is together with a veiled girl dressed in jeans and sweater, as they walk, sit and even dance on and around the bridge. He is obviously courting the women; he touches her face and shoulders and flirtatiously prevents her from leaving by holding her bag when she wants to get up. To the men watching them Sa‘ied sings “what do they have to do with us”, showing that they don’t mind what the strangers around them say and think about them.

In Cairo there are several spaces similar to this one that most people consider romantic. All people I asked would be unanimous about the romantic value of parks in Giza, the Qasr al-‘Aini bridge, and the Hussein mosque. Even Nada (19), who doesn’t go to school and hardly ever leaves her block, has once visited the bridge with her fiancée. One afternoon when I helped her to prepare breakfast in the kitchen she told me where they used to go together: “My fiancée comes to visit me here every Friday. He also took me out once during the *‘īd* (Eid, the feast at the end of Ramaḍan). We went to the cinema and to the Qasr al – Nil bridge. But we never go out because my brothers don’t want me to.”

“And would you go sit in cafés?”

“No! We would never sit in a café, cafés are for men.”

“But those in Downtown for example, there you can sit both women and men?”

“Yes but those are for bad women.”

Other women I spoke with told me they loved to go to the cafés but didn’t like to walk along the Nile because the women there weren’t decent. In the next chapter we will further discuss ideas of decency within the neighborhood.

How does a space become a romantic space? In urban design theory romantic environments are those that exceed the ordinary and the materiality of daily life. Most of these spaces are close to nature. In case of the bridge we find that the space is relatively open, and nature is present in the form of the Nile and the parks around it. Yet, not all spaces with these qualities are claimed by couples to become particular subjective romantic spaces.

Besides, I can see that the view from the *Qasr al-Nil*-bridge is beautiful and the cool wind above the river is often quite pleasant, but to walk on this bridge I experience as far from romantic. Almost every passer-by I encounter gives in to the urge of yelling something to me, and to get from one side to the other at night is sometimes so intimidating that I rather don’t cross it walking. Yet for the couples leaning on the balustrade or strolling hand in hand this really is a romantic space. How is this possible?

LeFèbvre wrote that individuals produce social spaces by their actions and that existing spaces determine actions in turn. Because couples have visited the bridge in the past, others will go there in the future. In other words, people *make* it romantic by going there in their quality of being lovers. Even though the bridge meets all the requirements a space must have to be romantic, its romantic value is not intrinsic to the place but ultimately depends on the reproducing actions and understanding of its users. Here, the understanding of the meaning precedes the meaning itself. Simmel indeed said that “space is an activity of the mind” (2009,

549). For this bridge to be romantic it is necessary that there exists a common and permanent understanding of its romantic value among a certain social group.

How does such an understanding remain “common and permanent”? According to Lofland, there are two main ways in which social actors learn meanings of places in the city. The most important way is the “word- of-mouth instruction” which people start to receive at a young age (1985, 101). Besides what individuals hear from others, mass media such as movies, television (cf. Saied’s song), radio and even guidebooks are conveyers of “locational meanings” (1985, 103).

### **ENGAGEMENTS AS SHORT-TERM RELATIONSHIPS**

The only acceptable form of mating for a young woman in Bulāq is a long term relationship within the boundaries of marriage. All people in the neighborhood I spoke with, both men and women, do not see short term mating in the form of dating or relationships as appropriate for women. An engagement is traditionally a preparation for a long term agreement and for a young woman not supposed to be a short term relationship.

However, according to some women I spoke with, men sometimes see engagement as short term mating options and end engagements as they wish. They also don’t fear about their virginity as women do so they can have short term relationships with women. The following conversation I had with Mervat (25, recently married) is illustrative. I asked her if women get engaged in order to be able to freely hang out with guys.

“You mean to go out to nice places and receive nice gifts? No, to marry. A guy can engage for fun because he wants to spend time with a girl and break up whenever he wants, but girls want to marry. Because you know, the number of girls in Egypt is higher than that of men. We are more. So it is difficult to find somebody. Besides, as a girl when you get engaged a lot they will talk about you more. They will say “she has been engaged and broken up so many times, there must be something wrong with her”. But guys can get engaged as often as they want nobody will tell them anything.”



That engagements nowadays turn into more temporary and circular events also becomes clear from the way Nada (19), a young girl who's family lives both in Bulāq and Saft al-Laban, speaks about hers and her fiancée's previous engagements. She told me the following: "I already knew my fiancée because he's my cousin. Before that I was engaged to someone else but I didn't like him anymore. My fiancée was engaged at the moment but then he broke up with her for me."

Though families don't hesitate to end their daughter's or son's engagement when they discover a flaw in the other party (for example when the groom doesn't bring a promised refrigerator), we can also understand the increasing temporality of engagements as a recent phenomenon when we realize that women's access to and the availability of romantic city spaces outside neighborhood makes temporary engagements much more interesting for men. For where would be the point in engaging in multiple engagements "for fun" if there was no fun in such relationships, when for example, a man could only meet his fiancée on Friday at her parent's house. Bridges and parks facilitate more romantic interpretations of engagements because here young couples can hold hands and more, or, for example, reenact the Titanic standing together in front of a boat on the Nile (5 pounds per shared trip). A development men enjoy but women are careful with, for as Mervat says, to engage multiple times makes their "value" in the marriage market decrease.

## **CONCLUSION**

The economic and spatial characteristics of Bulāq as a lower class neighborhood situated at a distance from Downtown Cairo close enough for people to bridge daily result in a particular way of dating among its inhabitants. Their habits have shaped city spaces and given meaning to certain places in the city. Individuals reproduce these meanings on a daily bases

and children start to learn them from a young age, while they might change them as they grow up.

Instead of arranged marriages, young people nowadays choose their partners themselves either based on previous acquaintance or a spontaneous witnessing of an attractive partner on the man's part somewhere in the city. The appearance of women and the recognizability of her clothes as well as her behavior in public space is crucial in the partner selection pattern. The city itself resembles a large outdoor market where men "see" women. Men see and follow women they like sometimes based on the first impression. Further, the fact that young women enter outside spaces within and outside the neighborhood means an increased interaction between unrelated members of opposite sexes and with that a decreased endogamy as people marry candidates outside their own neighborhood.

“We know only what we do, what we make, what we construct; and all that we make, all that we construct, are realities.” –Naum Gabo.

We have witnessed couples on bridges, boats and parks in Cairo’s central public spaces and to some extent understood why they were there. Now we must find out where these young people come from in order to further enhance our understanding. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a spatial analysis of the neighborhood in order to show the role of the neighborhood community and its spaces within the engagement and marriage process and to further explain why spaces outside the neighborhood are so important for romance even during legal engagements and why certain meeting strategies (school, work, random street encounters) exist. Such an analysis also serves to demonstrate how gendered spaces influences gender roles within patterns of finding partners, and how dominant convictions about gender segregation shape spaces of engagement and weddings in the neighborhood.

I focus both on the physical characteristics of the neighborhood as well its social composition. In this context I also discuss the relation between density and privacy and the perceived pressure the community in the neighborhood has on young unmarried men and women. I will further explore the gendered spatialities young people experience within their neighborhood. Until marriage young people do not have many spaces in the neighborhood where they can meet people from the opposite sex. The gendered division of spaces within the neighborhood sometimes differs from that in other spaces in the city, such as middle class restaurants, malls, and universities, but yet spaces within the neighborhood play an important part in informing young people’s understanding of gender roles through which they reproduce the meaning of these spaces by adhering to its norms. Exploring the neighborhood and its

community is crucial to understand the everyday romantic behavior of young unmarried and married people.

### **THE NEIGHBORHOOD COMMUNITY WITHIN THE NEOLIBERAL METROPOLIS**

While the neighborhood is outside the home it is an inside space compared to the rest of the city. In a way, it is a sort of threshold between house and city, a space between the finite inside and the infinite outside. In the same way as the house forms a buffer between I and world, the neighbourhood forms a middle space between the house and the city. According to the Oxford English Dictionary a neighbourhood is a “district or community within a town or city”. Recently scholars defined neighborhood as “the bundle of spatially based attributes associated with clusters of residences, sometimes in conjunction with other land uses” (Galster 2001, 2112). A neighbourhood I see as a collection of neighbors who live together in a part of a city or town that has particular shared characteristics, these can be physical in terms of the streets and buildings that have been built in a certain style and period, or related to the socio-economic status of the “neighbors” in the neighbourhood.

The relevance of neighborhoods as site of everyday social relations has declined drastically as a result of urbanization in the modern era (Wirth 1964, Fisher 1976). The latter provided the ideal recourses to form communities outside the neighborhood, namely a large and diverse group of fellow city-dwellers, among whom those with similar interests and skills, and the means to reach them such as increased mobility based on technological advances in transportation as well as modern forms of communication in the form of first the telephone and especially nowadays the internet (South and Crowder 2000, Fisher 1984, Wellman 1977).

Louis Wirth, defined a community as “a territorial base, distribution in space of men, institutions, and activities, close living together on the basis of kinship and organic interdependence, and a common life based upon the mutual correspondence of interests”

(Wirth 1964, 166). But in the city social networks and communities are no longer mainly based on proximity (Fisher 1984, Gusfield 1975, McMillan and Chavis 1986), but have become “de-spatialized” (South and Crowder 2000, 1972, Völker et al. 2007) in “a trend toward less socializing within the neighborhood and more outside it, thus a declining attachment to place” (Guest and Wierzbicki in Wu 2012, 549).

Despite the fact that neighborhood communities in large cities tend to be weak, within the neoliberal city they can have an important socializing function. Neoliberal cities all over the world “evidence an increasing polarization of rich and poor, inscribed spatially by divisions between gentrified neighborhoods and exclusive suburbs for the rich and neglected city spaces and aging suburbs for the working class and poor” (Herbert and Brown 2006, 766). In the neoliberal metropolis, the rich support the persistence of poor spaces. The low-paid service jobs that they provide guarantee the economic survival of the poor and with that the survival of their neighborhoods and their inscription as poor spaces. Moreover, their monopoly on high incomes combined with the lack of government regulation inhabits the development of the informal neighborhood/slum. Alsayyad and Roy (2006) show how cuts on government spending on social welfare in Cairo make for a “sharp increase in poverty” (10) in informal neighborhoods.

This new sharpened unbalance of rich neighborhoods on the one side and slums on the other produces images of poor neighborhoods that stigmatize its inhabitants. For example, Būlāq ad-Dakrūr, like many poor areas is “perceived as a hotbed for criminals, terrorists and all sorts of socially unacceptable behavior”, perceptions that according to Ayman Nour make even the local residents seek refuge in “anonymity, indifference and distrust” (2011, 86). Regardless of the question if the latter is true, such prejudices contribute to a moral economy in which desires for respectability have a central place. I argue that through this moral economy the neighborhood community within the neoliberal city has a main influence on

people's understandings of themselves and is a main producer of gendered subjectivities. To elaborate this idea we must now turn to Būlāq ad-Dakrour.

### **BEING TOGETHER WITH SEMI-STRANGERS: NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY IN BŪLĀQ**

Būlāq's inhabitants form a neighborhood community with a varying degree of repeated interaction among its members. The socio-economic composition of Būlāq's population was homogeneous when it started to grow from the 1960s onwards, consisting of almost all peasants. Previously, Cairo's western boundary was situated at the edges of the formal areas of Doqqi and Mohandeseen. Būlāq was a rural district comprising separated mud built villages, such as Zanīn, Ṭābiq ad-Diyāba, and Saft al-Laban, where peasants (*fellaḥīn*) lived. As the result of rapid urbanization during the last decades these grew together into one neighbourhood with different quarters. In 1947, Būlāq had a population of 15 000 people. In 1967 this had grown to a 189 000, and to 454 000 in 1996 (Bayat and Denis 2000, 189). This new population was highly heterogeneous at first, consisting of immigrants from the countryside, original peasants, people from working class neighborhoods in central Cairo who fled crowding, and middle class citizens who couldn't afford housing in other neighborhoods (cf. Bayat and Denis 2000, Iwasaki and El-Laithy 2013).

Umm Mervat was born and raised in Sayeda Zainab, a working class neighborhood in the center of Cairo, but married in Būlāq forty years ago because her husband had bought land there to build a house. In these days the area was mostly rural with rural grounds exceeding the build spaces. According to Umm Mervat, most people lived from the land except for those who worked at the Ministry of Agriculture or at the Cairo University that were both situated nearby. The newcomers from the city were soon joined by immigrants from rural areas such as al-Sa'īd. Now, because "strangers" had entered the neighborhood nobody lived from agriculture anymore but worked in formal, rich, areas in the city. Indeed, Elena Piffero writes

that the rapid urbanization of the area was facilitated by “its proximity with rich neighbourhoods (such as Mohandesseen and Doqqi), as well as with Cairo University” (Piffero, 8). The difference between the fellahīn and the people from the city disappeared over time. Homa Hoodfar (1994) describes how *baladī*-women in the 1980s started to wear the veil like educated women from the city to escape stigmatizing as backwards and undeveloped. These women weren’t completely unveiled though but used to wear scarves on their braided hair, while the braids appeared from two sides. Nowadays Būlāq’s inhabitants come from families with different origins, but they are part of an urban community that has developed a specific moral order with social norms that are similar to other working class neighborhoods in the city. Research for a recent German development project in Cairo’s informal neighborhoods concluded that these areas “do not host only the urban poor, but also middle class young, educated families, university students and public sector employees in search of an accommodation at reasonable prices” (Piffero 2009, 5). This should not raise the illusion that the economic level of people in Būlāq often exceeds that of the average working-class family. The total monthly income of the families in my sample, including the salaries of older children, ranged between 400 to 1000 pounds a month (roughly between 55 and 140 dollars).

Few studies discuss the subject of neighborhood attachment and community in Būlāq ad-Dakrūr , and those who do pay only little attention to the topic. Moreover, the different reports on development projects in Cairo’s informal areas have conflicting outcomes about community in Egypt’s and Cairo’s informal areas in general and Būlāq in specific. One report writes that “[r]esidents of informal areas help each other out and jointly implement activities of mutual interest in a similar manner to traditional communities” by creating horizontal networks that are mindless of people’s socioeconomic status (Abdelhalim 2010, 10).

Relationships between community members are long term and depend on “the physical proximity of community members in informal areas” (Abdelhalim 2010, 10).

But given the size of Būlāq a vibrant community in this neighborhood where all members know each other becomes unlikely. Būlāq covers an area of roughly 13 km<sup>2</sup>, with a populated area of 11,5 km<sup>2</sup>. With a population of 747 400 in 2009<sup>2</sup> this makes for a population density of 65 000 people per km<sup>2</sup>. To compare, for all of greater Cairo this is 10 400/km<sup>2</sup>, almost six times less. Sarah Sabry (2010) however argues that the estimated population must be 1,2 million people based on the number of electricity meters in the area, which would lead to a density of approximately 105 000/km<sup>2</sup>. The population density in the neighborhood relates to crowdedness in both (semi) public outside spaces and within houses. Houses are small with an average of 4,5 per household. Outside the house one finds crowded streets, schools (with an average of 59 children per classroom) and market places.

My informants often only knew the neighbors who lived in their street (*ḥāra*) and the adjacent streets. Especially local retailers and hairdressers know many people in a street. For example, when I would be searching for Mervat’s house, the shopkeepers with little stands in the alley were always able to tell me where “Umm Ahmed’s house” was. Emad, a tuk-tuk-driver in his early twenties, nonetheless told me that “not everyone but the majority of the people in Būlāq knows each other.” He then corrected himself saying “I mean most men know each other, because you know, women here, women don’t really leave the house. They come nor go.” When I asked him about the places where he meets people from the neighborhood he mentioned most of all the street, the café and his work, when he drives through the area in his tuk-tuk. “Faces meet each other”, he said.

Besides the immediate neighbors, most people are strangers to each other. But, unlike the strangers outside the neighborhood, these strangers do not only have similar traditions, they

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.giza.gov.eg/MainPage/Statistics1.aspx>.



also share the same territory. They are semi-strangers. They dress in a certain way, listen to the same sort of music and have a similar use of language. Their housing conditions and public spaces are similar. And be there a strong community or not, there a strong sense of community that is based on a moral economy through which the neighborhood produces subjectivities.

### **THE MORAL ECONOMY OF BŪLĀQ: A DEFENSE AGAINST A NEOLIBERAL CITY THAT READS THEM AS POOR**

“From Mumbai to São Paulo, New York to Glasgow, we are witnessing the entrenchment of urban inequality and the increasing fragmentation of the urban landscape” (Jeffrey et al. 2012, 1251). Cairo, with its gated communities and elite suburbs arising outside of the city that contrast with informal neighborhoods on the edge of the old Cairo, it not an exception. In these segregated spaces the rich and poor each live their lives according to their own convictions and habits.

Every demarcated social space has its own sets of rules that characterize it. Georg Simmel wrote that “[b]oundaries construct an inner cohesiveness that is subject to its own, localized regulations” (2009, 42). The railroad tracks that separate the informal area of Būlāq and the formal area of adjacent Doqqi mark a clear division between two worlds with their own rules and traditions. Jane Jacobs called railroad tracks “the classic example of borders”, that aren’t just physical but mainly social borders (1992, 257-258). Physical divisions in cities such as railroad tracks are not just dividers between areas but also between different neighborhood classes and their related cultures. When Doreen Massey speaks of high-tech workplaces in England she shows that “closures are constructed both materially and imaginatively, through both security guards and the symbolisms of exclusivity” (Massey 2005, 178). Mere physical obstacles turn into imagined social boundaries as well. And those imagined, fluid social boundaries are first and most important in the division of city areas, for many a neighborhood

proceeds into a poorer or wealthier one without any tangible border in between them. From Downtown to the working class neighborhood of Sayyeda Zeinab, for example, one can take a half hour walk and see the buildings and street gradually become smaller and more crowded.

Social boundaries nevertheless often make good use of physical obstacles, and sometimes even become reinforced spatially. Thus the social boundary that surrounds the neighborhood community of Būlāq is embodied in the physical boundary that the railroad tracks form, tracks that are hardly accessible except by climbing feeble bridges. No government yet has provided but the simplest infrastructure in the form of decent, easy accessible rail crossings, a sharp contrast to the five lane avenues that provide access to middle and upper class neighborhoods of New Cairo.

But whereas the living spaces of the rich and the poor are separated either by distance or by clear socio-physical boundaries, their everyday activities aren't as spatially segregated as one may think, even though this only works one way: the rich usually never visit the informal neighborhoods, but many people from low-income areas as Būlāq encounter their wealthier fellow townsmen in their upper-class spaces on a daily basis. They meet them when they watch their children in middle and upper-class nurseries, guard their private clubs, serve them in their western-style coffeeshops and restaurants, clean their apartments and villa's, drive them around in their cars and build their neighborhoods.

This mobility combined with the continued production of images on television, a loyal informant that in most households incessantly does its job all day long, is what informs people in the neighborhood about others. They called the upper middle and upper-class people *mabsūṭīn*, content people, those who have "big apartments and cars". Moreover, they thought of "rich" (and foreign) women as people with no morality left and engaging in all sorts of unacceptable sexual activities, "even with other women", as two sisters once whispered to me.

Mervat, as we will see in the next chapter, thought richer people had sex oftener before marriage, “because they have cars where they can be alone”.

But just as they have their ideas about these upper class people, they know that they have theirs about them. They are convinced that they would look down on them if they weren’t careful to prove them wrong. For television teaches them as many prevalent ideas about “poor people” as it does about the rich. These prejudices are often related to ignorance, criminality and immorality: images they reject and against which they protect themselves by producing and adhering to their own strict moral economy.

Many upper and upper middle-class people indeed seem to look down on, or at least fear, the informal neighborhoods. Often when I told other Egyptians I was going to Būlāq they warned me that I shouldn’t, because it wasn’t safe. When I, for example, told my middle class Egyptian teachers years ago about my new acquaintances with people in the neighborhood they said I shouldn’t go there by myself again. In the eyes of the upper-class women whom Anouk De Koning interviewed, these areas were “a vague and distant reality”, one that was “marked as dirty, full of bacteria and health hazards, uncouth people and harassment” (De Koning 2009, 550). I remember another conversation I had with some young women from Heliopolis, an upper middle class neighborhood in Cairo. They asked me if I knew any Egyptians besides them, and I answered that I did, I had, for example, friends who lived in Būlāq and Imbaba. After I had shown them pictures of a trip we went on together, they asked me a bit shyly why all my friends were “like... ‘that’”.

But I have never seen Gihan more surprised and offended than when I asked her opinion about the rumors I had heard among middle class Egyptians that there was a lot of drugs and criminality in Būlāq. “What!” she exclaimed in reaction to my question, “that is not true!” And thereafter she repeated all afternoon that she was convinced that these things weren’t more common here than in other parts of the city. Beverly Skeggs (1997) argues that the

desire to prove one's respectability is one that many people have. According to her "respectability contains judgments of class, race, gender and sexuality and different groups have differential access to the mechanisms for generating, resisting and displaying respectability" (Skeggs 1997, 2). In Būlāq respectability is strongly connected with chastity. The women in my sample were never slow to judge other women as disrespectful, immoral or bad-mannered (*'illit 'adab*), for being too easy with men, too touchy, dressed too freely or for going to certain places. Likewise they were equally quick to safeguard their own reputations with comments as "I didn't talk to him, of course, because I was too shy", or "I would never do this or that", or "I don't go there because that is not a place decent women go". They are, in short, careful not to be associated with "bad people" or people from lower classes than themselves (those who are "really poor"), who they too see as scandalous, criminal and shameful. In their perception, surrounding them was an immoral world against which they had to defend themselves, their chastity and their reputation.

Interestingly, men's respectability seems to lay as much in the chastity of "their" women; their wives, daughters and sisters. They therefore closely watch their behavior. For example, some men allowed themselves to go out with their fiancées, but would never let their sisters go out with theirs. This caused quite an argument between Mervat and Ahmed, who himself always went out with her (though he never touched her hand, "not even" when they crossed a street), but didn't let his sister meet her fiancée outside the house. To explain this he said that he trusted himself with her but that he didn't trust "that man" with his sister. So for men to be respectable, at least so it appeared, was to have respectable women.

We shouldn't ignore however, that a certain degree of social conservatism seems widespread in many of Cairo's environments. Respectability is not only important among low-income communities. De Koning clearly demonstrates that upper-class Cairene women struggle with the same issues of reputation when they negotiate their presence in upper class

coffeeshops. She shows how, when these aren't fancy enough, they don't want to go there lest people see them as prostitutes or women without morality. This way they make sure spaces they go are those of their own group only.

Nevertheless, the perceived stigmatization within the neoliberal city has resulted in the production of a moral economy particular to Būlāq and the neighborhoods that are similar to it. People call the areas on their side of the railroads "inside" while they perceive the formal neighborhoods on the other side as "outside". While the inhabitants of the informal areas spend a great part of their time at school or work in the rest of the city where they intermingle with people who have other habits, at the end of the day they return to a neighbourhood where specific norms exist.

What seems to be most striking, is that the respectability for which this moral economy aims, is initially perhaps a reaction to the stigmatization that is a product of the neoliberal city, but is thereafter most fervently displayed to the neighborhood. For example, married women I knew made sure to keep their living rooms in the best of states and to collect as many glasses for their cabinets as would fit, all that for the eyes of visiting neighbors and friends. Another social norm in Būlāq prescribes that a woman doesn't speak with a male person who is not her relative before marriage. She does, therefore, not want to be seen with male friends or sometimes even her fiancée in her neighborhood lest people who know her see and talk about her. Moreover, married women with whom I spoke in the street always showed themselves to be obedient to their husbands and leave all decision making to them, to not, for example, stop a tuktuk if he was with her, to not talk to the driver, to not pay him, but let him do so instead, and to walk on the inside of the street.

It becomes clear that the respectability that is at stake is displayed most of the time to the eyes of neighbors, and is therefore a respectability that people achieve only and foremost in space. Julia Elyachar (2005), when she studied the results neoliberalism in Cairo had on the

morality of workmen in a low-income class neighborhood, notices that to do good according to one's conscience (*damīr*) has nothing to do with being good Muslims or Christians, but, she writes “this conscience embodies the eyes of one’s own neighbors and community and is part of the formation of the self” (149), thus supporting the idea that especially the neighborhood produces subjectivities. Social norms were perhaps at first (partly) a response to the opinion of others outside the community, but people seem to uphold them mostly for the opinion of those inside of it. Therefore we must now proceed with a closer look to that community.

### **CROWDING, PRIVACY AND THE MORAL ECONOMY**

We already learned that Būlāq has a large population on little space. Houses are close to each other, with narrow alleys in between them. From one’s balcony it is easy to look into the house on the other side, and people often keep windows closed and sometimes use curtains over their balconies. For anyone who endeavors to display his or her respectability there are a lot of willing watchers at hand for sure. With this in mind it is easy to see how the displaying of respectability not only entails a showing of accepted behavior, but, almost ironically, also an active hiding of all sorts of personal behavior to prevent people to see the possible disrespectful. People use privacy as a tool to safeguard their reputation within the neighborhood community. While according to Ghannam (2002) privacy is something the people in Cairo lower class neighborhoods eschew rather than search for, and that they don’t even have a specific Arabic translation for the English equivalent, I found privacy to be very important within the community of Būlāq.

Here density leads to individualization as people want to protect their privacy from the neighbors that are everywhere above, underneath and around them. Indeed, Ayman Nour calls Būlāq a neighborhood with “a high degree of secrecy” (Nour 2011, 86). Secrecy is an essential way to guarantee privacy. Umm Mervat for example said she doesn’t like to know

the people in the street because close relations make everyone talk about her problems. She gave birth to her oldest son in this house but the people in the street don't even know where she works.

“When I was younger I had friends, but I don't know where they went. I don't like to talk to the neighbors because when they see your house they'll tell the whole street what it looks like and what you have. Or if you have a problem they'll tell everyone that you don't have enough to eat for example. But I do visit them when they have a wedding or funeral. I speak with my colleagues at work but we never meet after work except if somebody has a special occasion.”

The sister's in law of Gihan, a young married mother of three children, frequently pull out a couple of chairs on warm summer evenings to sit in the street in front of their house, but she herself would never do that because she doesn't want anybody to see her sit there. When I asked Gihan why she didn't have friends in her street she said, in a manner very similar to Umm Mervat's, “if I tell one of them my problems or things they will tell the others and then the whole street will know”.

In the same way that Umm Mervat didn't want people to speak about the amount of food she had and the condition of her furniture and Gihan didn't want them to know her problems, young people and their families don't want anybody in their street to speak about their romantic behavior. As soon as a street starts talking about a young woman's actions, her reputation is threatened. We saw in the previous chapter that the opinion neighbors have about a person matters indeed for her (or his) marriage chances, for the potential groom will gain information about her among them.

People in the neighbourhood would never tell certain personal information to their acquaintances in the street or even family members, but they confided many things to me as a stranger from outside their neighborhood-community. Georg Simmel argued that there is a curvilinear relationship between the secrecy of facts and the level of acquaintance of the

people one shares them with, because sometimes people share more private things with strangers and not with intimate friends (Simmel 1950, Marshall 1972). This tendency coincides with a general preference for noninvolvement with neighbors, and a “choice of persons other than neighbors as close friends” (Marshall 1972, 97). Many young women I spoke to happened to have mostly friends outside the neighborhood whom they met at work or school, whereas young married women in my sample tended to be very lonely as they hadn’t made new friends yet in their new street, and gradually lost contact with their old friends as they entered new phases in their lives. We will come back to this in the last chapter. But, as we saw earlier, choice of friends outside the neighborhood is not necessary a tendency to gain privacy but also a result of the fact that in one’s street people differ in their interests while at school and work people share more similarities.

While we keep some information to ourselves, other personal events we want, for different reasons, to share with the people around us. In Būlāq the private doesn’t go out, *unless it needs to*. Private things such as information about the first intimacy between engaged couples or weddings are explicitly made public and out in the open so that everyone knows about them. The name of the official wedding is *ishhār*, which literally means “making known”. Diane Singerman, when studying popular neighborhoods in central Cairo, noticed that “although more common in the past, a *dukhla baladi* often occurs while the guests are still crowding the bride’s home” (1989, 107). This may perhaps, not happen anymore in Būlāq today, but it does show how otherwise private actions such as intercourse become the subject of so much public attention when there is a reason for the community to know them. In this case it is vital that the community knows of the couple’s legitimate relation so that they can live together without trouble or anyone looking down upon them in the midst of their neighbors. This is not a direct way of showing of respectable behavior, but an indirect one: it is an un-hiding of private behavior in order for others not to see one as disrespectful.



In Būlāq people share life events such as engagements and marriage with their vaguest acquaintances. It seems that when one marries the whole neighborhood, if possible, must know. As Singerman described about the lower class neighborhoods in Cairo she studied in the 1980s: “when the decision is taken to marry, the community celebrates each stage of that long process with (...) traditional rituals (...)” Singerman 1989, 107. It is very important to invite many people to one’s wedding, and almost equally important for people to visit their acquaintances important occasions such as weddings and funerals. For here is an crucial unhiding going on that helps people preserve their respectability according to the rules entrenched within the moral economy.

Salma and Sayed’s *tangīd* (part of the wedding when the couple and their family brings all the furniture from the bride’s house to the new apartment) took place in the narrow street in front of Salma’s parental house. Salma’s family had displayed all the furniture they had collected for the wedding in the alley. Seven blankets were dangling on ropes that were suspended between the buildings on each side of the street. Piles of new mattresses with big red teddy bears and pillows on top of them were lying on the side. The *menagged*, the mattress maker, was still busy finishing yet another mattress while his son helped him.

The street is by far the best place to hold a wedding party, because here one can invite as many people as possible. A marriage hall allows only for a limited amount of guests, “perhaps only fifty”, one woman told me, “while the street can have two hundred or maybe three hundred people. There you can invite anybody you want.” In the house one is freer than in a hall to invite as much people as one wants, but here space of course is limited and the advantage of the open space of the street, where even uninvited guests still here and see the wedding, is absent. This is partly made up for by turning up the volume of the music and opening the windows as far as possible to at least let the whole street know of one’s occasion. The idea of privacy that is connected with the house does not seem to apply in case of a party.

“Why would you mind who comes or not? If you have something you don’t want anybody to see you can remove it before the party starts”, one person explained to me.

The woman’s body is an important representative space in the neighborhood as well. When she wears the gold and wedding ring her husband bought her she shows both her marital and her economic status, the wealth of her husband. When an engagement is settled, the man is supposed to buy his fiancée rings, they are called the *shabka*, and engaged women wear them on their right hand. When Marwa (23) was going to get engaged, her fiancée got her, as the rumor goes, rings with a value of 10 000 pounds, made of gold. But then her uncles started to re-investigate the man and discovered that his mother didn’t have a good reputation in the neighborhood. They decided the engagement could not happen and that she had to give the rings back. But Marwa wanted to keep both the rings and the fiancée. For her to walk through her street with bare hands again felt painful because she knew it reminded all neighbors of the story.

But there is more than the eyes of neighbors that lead couples out of the neighborhood to the Nile and parks around it. A search for privacy would be reason enough indeed, but there are physical aspects of the neighborhood that we must take into account as well. We have seen that Būlāq is a highly crowded neighborhood. The availability of open spaces besides the crowded streets, markets and shops is almost nil (not to deny that a lot of talking can take place here). There are no parks, no squares (except for some junctures of the main streets that are full of tuktuk’s), libraries, town halls or playgrounds except for several ping pong and pool tables and swings along the road, which are not free. The *zaḥma* (crowding) in the neighborhood’s outside spaces has a negative influence on sociability. Moreover, Būlāq has high noise and little light compared to the formal neighborhood in its proximity. Therefore, in their free time, especially at night, people from the neighborhood pull out in large numbers to the Gam‘at ad-Dewal, a large avenue in the upper-middleclass neighborhood of

Mohandeseen, to sit in the small stripe of park in the middle of the street. This is the closest open space to which they have access.

Mervat, who married a year ago, once said that it is much nicer to hang out in a beautiful area such as Mohandeseen, or along the Nile, on the bridge, because “who wants to hang out in a slum?” And indeed, perhaps we should turn the question around, for would people from Doqqi who wanted to escape their neighborhood come hang out in Būlāq? No, because there is no place for them to go. There are no outside spaces in Būlāq where unrelated men and women can spend time together.

### **GENDERED SPACES IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD**

This brings us to another important feature of the neighborhood which figures in much of its subjectivity producing function. Much of its spaces have a gendered meaning, which is a result of the moral economy. Doreen Massey (1994) argues that “space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (...) are gendered through and through” (186). She speaks of the spatially embedding of gender constructions (2005, 144). These constructions are the outcome of the present moral economy. Fran Tonkiss (2005) argues that spaces such as the football ground aren’t masculine because “men are doing their thing there”, but that there is a larger “exchange of meanings between the spatial and the social” that makes for gendered spaces (97). However, with LeFèbvre’s idea in mind that space is a social product of our everyday actions, I see as what makes male and female spaces is exactly the fact that they are spaces where men and women “do their thing”.

There are little spaces where men and women who are not family can be together, and since the strength of a community depends partly on the opportunities its members have to meet each other (Völker et al. 2007, 101), this results in a separation throughout the community which produces subjectivities with particular understandings of gender roles.

Availing expectations about gendered behavior turn public spaces into semi-public spaces, space only accessible to men or women, such as the cafés in Būlāq.<sup>3</sup> The street is perhaps equally accessible to men and women, but it is not the inappropriate space for unrelated men and women to hang out with each other (though it's not, for that matter, less suitable for men to "see" women).

One could say this gendered separation of social space is a reflection of a divided neighborhood-community. Men in the neighborhood know each other and women know each other but the level of interaction between the sexes, within the neighborhood, is minimal. This separation reflects in the gendered spaces, and they in their turn affect the neighborhood community. Diane Singerman once argued that despite this separation of the sexes in public, "[b]ecause of the constant interaction between the sexes within the household, however, Egypt is not a highly segregated society" (1989, 106). However, how does the interaction between the members of a family make up for the fact that unrelated men and women have no space in a neighborhood to have informal encounters? In other words, how can a neighborhood community with members of both genders exist, if men and women in the neighborhood only meet their own family members? The reason Egypt is not a highly segregated society is rather that unrelated men and women do have plenty spaces to interact *outside* their own neighborhood, such as school, university and the workplace, besides parks and other (semi-) public spaces as the street and public transportation where anonymity creates possibility.

Segregation of gender in Būlāq's public spaces is visible everywhere. The street, "the basic unit of public life in the city" (Tonkiss 2005, 68), is divided into numerous male and female spaces, in addition to some more neutral spaces. Male spaces in the area vary from the little cafés in the streets and local mosques to barbershops and even the front seats of tuktuk's.

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<sup>3</sup> Cafés are, of course, technically private spaces because they are privately owned, as long as they are open to the (paying) public, they can count as public spaces, cf. Fran Tonkiss 2005. Most of the cafés in Būlāq are all outside spaces, and form part of the street.

If we take a *tuktuk* from *al-Kobrī al-Khashab* (The Wooden Bridge) and follow one of the few main roads one, we pass numerous female and male spaces. Even before we set off we encounter a male space within the tuktuk itself, for a man always occupies the drivers' seat, and the seat next to him is a male space too because it is not appropriate for a woman to go sit there. One driver told me, when I asked him about if women ever sat in the front seat, that women do sometimes sit next to him when they are with four or five persons and don't want to split up. But he was sure to tell me that this wasn't normal female behavior in this neighborhood. "You know", he said "the women here like to *mistargelīn* a bit, they like to act like men."

When we move on perhaps the most obvious male spaces are the cafés on the side of the road. They are groups of chairs in front of little shops, where men sit and smoke waterpipe. Giḥan, a young mother from the neighborhood, once explained to me that

"the cafés here are for men. There is nothing for a woman to find there. They talk about anything bad or good and there is shisha and things. They like to sit there at the end of the day. But we go to visit each other. In Downtown it's different, that is for tourists, we can go sit in a café there or at the Nile or Hussein. But here no."

Right next to a café an older female vendor sits selling fruit. Her everyday actions produce and reproduce a female space in the street, close to the men, almost inside of their café, but because she is engaged in a different action it is no problem for her to be there. Across the street we see two elder women sit behind buckets filled with cheese in front of a shop where men sell motors. Clearly, the boundaries between the male space of the café and the female space of their selling places are imaginary and temporary. There are not always physical barriers between them, but the actions the people perform in these spaces define them.

If we manage to look into one of the side streets, there is a chance that we see how women too create their own female leisure space in the street, be it in front of their houses, sometimes next to the barbershop or workplace where their sons or husbands are working. When Nada, a

young engaged woman, took me to show me her neighborhood, we met her mother and some of her friends sitting in front of the door, and she made me shake hands with all of them. She would never sit outside herself she said, because that was something “only for old women”. Thus the gendered segregation that the moral economy constructs becomes embedded in space. But they are temporal and relational, as we see in more detail when we will analyze the house.

Apart from everyday life the gendered division is visible too in the space of marriage festivities. Some of the celebrations take place near the house of the woman’s family, and others near the man’s house. Engagement parties and festivities before the formal wedding take place near the woman’s family. As we saw at Salma’s *tangīd*, it started at her family’s house. But also during the festivities itself, the gender separation always goes on. During the same party huge loudspeakers stood in the middle of the street, that served not only to let two whole streets enjoy the music, but also as dividers between the male and female spaces of the party. On the front side of the boxes was the male space where around 50 men stood smoking hash and cigarettes, all thing of which people highly disapprove that women use them. On the other side of the boxes the women stood. When the *mazon*, the Imam, came to perform the *Katb al-Kitab*, the writing of the marriage contract, they placed a table in the men’s section where the groom and the bride’s father (and not the bride) took place with another man and the Imam. Salma came to sign for not more than a minute and then disappeared again while the men read the Fatha and promised they would marry the woman. Some women came to stand near the table and the men made room for them. As soon as they were finished some men led the women back to their own part.

Mona and her husband celebrated their wedding in a hall. Here young women danced around the bride (and from time to time groom) while young men (and other people) didn’t come there, but watched from the side. These different female showing and male watching

spaces make perfect sense compared to the male gaze and women's body thing that is crucial to the partner finding process for young people in this neighborhood.

The strict segregation at weddings, and location of weddings, and everywhere in the neighborhood informs men and women about who they are and makes them adhere to this segregation tomorrow as well. Established male and female spaces are active producers of female and male subjectivities. A young woman who during her wedding moves from her parents house to her husbands' family building know she goes from the responsibility of one to the other.

## **CONCLUSION**

Whether people *feel* they are part of a community is as significant as the strength of the actual community itself. Sense of community determines actions even when people are not involved with their neighbors on a daily basis. For them the community of which they feel part signifies social control and pressure that determines their daily practices. This influence heightens desires for privacy and thus weakens neighborhood ties even more, but at the same time also binds people together within a moral economy.

The mass of strangers within the neighborhood does not have the same perceived advantages of anonymity and secrecy as the one outside of the neighborhood. The proximity of these strangers makes them a threat for privacy. Whereas in the outside spaces one can disappear in the mass, create privacy in the midst of public space, the closer one gets to the home, the more the possibility of familiarity increases. There is always a significant chance that somebody who knows you will see you. Moreover, the people in one's street are everyday witnesses of one's daily practices.

*“But is he who opens a door and he who closes it the same being?”*  
– Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 224.

“You see that house over there, on the third floor?” Amira, a young unmarried woman once asked me. We were standing on the balcony of her family’s house, and she was pointing with her finger to an apartment just across the street. “There is a bride there. I saw her two days ago behind the window, and she was wearing a red t-shirt. They just married, you know, it has only been a week and she hasn’t been outside yet. They never leave the house the first two weeks.”

The fascination this young woman had with the bride who had just moved into the new apartment across her house corresponds with a widespread preoccupation with marriage among both men and women from Būlāq. Marriage in this neighborhood is intricately connected with the obtaining of a new house of one’s own, starting a family and becoming adult. In this chapter I will offer insight into the meanings of the inside spaces of the home of the unmarried and married young man and woman in Būlāq.

Engagement and marriage, as all human activities, shape and follow a spatiality that is both fixed and fluid. The practices of people yesterday have produced it, but the actions of today and tomorrow alter and reproduce it. The stages directly before and after marriage are intricately dependent on spaces inside the house. Much of what happens in these periods is so strongly connected to space inside the house that we must analyze these spaces in order to understand the transition to adult life within this particular society.

I will first look at the importance the possession of a house has for people in this community. Then I will focus on the meanings gendered patterns of behavior have attached to spaces, first to the house itself but also to rooms and places within the house. Is the house a woman’s place? How do men relate to the house if it is? Which female and male spaces do men’s and women’s actions produce on a daily basis?



The house is the most inside space of the three levels I use for my analysis. We first started with the outside space of the city, and turned to the in-between space of the neighborhood, which is an inside space in opposite to the rest of the city, but as much an outside space where people else then family members, a mix of neighbors and strangers occupy the streets, cafés and markets. Now we will finally examine the inside space of the house. Mark Kingwell (2006, 279) describes the home as a “most basic interior”. The home is the one inside space that is, unlike the neighborhood, actually “inside”, as it is surrounded by physical walls on each side and thereby sheltered from the outside world. It is the primary building that contains the individual within and offers shelter and protection from the outside world. It is from here the individual sets of to discover everything other than himself.

Some philosophers, such as Jean Paul Sartre, say that a person’s actions define his individuality. An individual becomes oneself through doing, and sometimes also through having. A career can mark one’s individuality, as well as a person’s tastes, his car, and dress. The latter are all qualities which identify him as a singular person. For he who does not work, or do anything much under the eyes of those whose regard he esteems, the things he has, a house to begin with, becomes more important to define one’s being. This was Simone De Beauvoir’s argument when she wrote that men transcend the immanent lack of meaning of their lives through their daily activities in the outside world, while women establish their subjectivity through the managing and decorating of their houses.

To find satisfying occupational professions is a task I have not heard any of the people I’ve met confess to have accomplished. There aren’t many well-paying work opportunities for the young lower class men and women in revolutionary Cairo. I’ve listened to many a young man complain about the situation in the job market. Most men I found to work in the tertiary sector of the economy. Some, for example, worked as drivers on tuktuk’s or on other people’s taxis, others had low paying jobs in security at the clubs in richer neighborhoods. One man

worked in construction for twelve hours every day, while another helped with car reparation in private shops, and yet another as an assistant in a doctor's practice for a wage hardly worth mentioning. For young women the relationship with the job market is a little more complicated as there is not only their responsibility for housework and childcare but also a disapproval among many people in the neighborhood of the working married woman. These factors combine to further decrease the chances of finding married women from this area with successful careers. We will yet see more about this issue, but for now it suffices to say that the accepted and most common distribution between housework and non-housework is a traditional one leaving the former, in large lines, to women and the latter to men.

As long as one's pride is not to be found in low-paid unproductive labour, it must be somewhere else. The real marker of one's independent personhood we find in the house. A person who obtains a house comes to possess autonomy and privacy in a space that is entirely one's own (cf. Porteous 1976, 386). Mark Kingwell (2006, 279) describes the home as "an ambit of privacy and comfort as against the chaos and commerce of the outside." It is here where man can establish his own territory. Although, as we will still see below, the apartment sometimes seems more of a territory for women than for men, and a home territory does not necessarily have to be inside the house.

The owning of a house is intricately connected, in this neighborhood, with the founding of a family, and where he does not have the successful daily activities of his work, a man "has" his wife and later his children to mark his adulthood, perhaps even more than the woman who indeed fulfills her adulthood through marriage and children but also through her new reign in her own kitchen. We will see that the house plays a different role in both lives, but we are not as far yet: our couples thus far met and became engaged but never yet entered their houses.

To actually obtain a house of oneself in Cairo seems as difficult for young people in the neighborhood as it is to find a well-paying job. A woman or man from the neighborhood

cannot do so by him or herself. Neighborhood morality holds that it is inappropriate for young women to live on their own, but more important is that underneath such convictions lay economic conditions that perpetuate the status quo. Young men and especially women don't usually leave their parental house before marriage. On one's own it is impossible to first obtain a house and then run a household within it.

When we keep this in mind it is easier to understand why people lay so much weight on the provision of a house by one party and its equipment by the other. In the social system of Būlāq today, young men need young women to obtain and afterwards keep a house of themselves, and young women need young men. A bride and her family make sure to not marry her to a man who doesn't have an apartment for them to live in, and she needs to bring in her part of the deal as well. The high price of apartments and the low salary of future grooms combine into a delay of marriage that has become general all over Egypt.

### **PREPARATION OF THE NEW HOUSE**

The groom is responsible to provide the couple with an apartment and part of the furniture, and women further furnish it with other items such as kitchen utensils, mattresses, blankets and cushions. Agreements between families vary, as a woman's parents try to arrange as best of a situation for their daughter as possible. Some of the women told me a story about their friend who was to marry a young man who had agreed to purchase a refrigerator. Just before the wedding it turned out that he hadn't managed to bring one and the father of the bride then said that the marriage couldn't take place.

Umm Mervat, the mother of two women in my sample said the following:

“For Gihan and Mervat I bought the wooden table and all the pillows and things. My brother made all the furniture but the groom pays for it. He brings the apartment and half of the furniture.”

Young women spend years to collect all the things they will use in their future house. They start doing so long before there is question of a fiancée. On birthdays and other occasions young women receive and give each other cups and plates, or nightwear. Women with paid jobs also save money to buy many items for themselves. Marwa, 25 years old and not yet engaged, paid one of her acquaintances who owned a clothes store around 100 pounds a month, about a quarter of her salary, to pick out pajamas and home suits which she saved for a future marriage. Mothers too seem proud to get their daughters nice dressing gowns and clothes and families support their daughters with larger purchases such as mattresses and televisions. Towards the wedding date the parental house of the unmarried young woman becomes filled with new furniture, clothes and other house items, often stapled in a corner of one of the rooms and shown to every visitor who comes with a willing eye.

In Nada's case her mother had brought her most of her dowry. "I will show you my *gahāz* (trousseau) next. I have fifteen training suits and fifteen nightdresses and lots of other dresses," Nada excitedly told while I helped her to prepare breakfast. Afterwards we sat down for more than an hour in the company of her mother, her sister-in-law and some children. She showed me all her new clothes, including many sets of underwear. The collection seemed endless. But once Nada was done with the two big bags of clothes she said that these were only clothes for inside the house, and that she didn't have anything to go out in. While watching this demonstration of her new home clothes, I understood how much marriage to her and other women like her was an event related to the house. She prepared to marry by collecting as many different costumes as possible to wear each day and show her husband when he comes home from work. I asked if she planned on never buying clothes again after marriage, and Nada's mother confirmed that she herself had very rarely bought anything new since her wedding.

Diane Singerman, relying herself on her research in the 1980s, wrote that “[m]ost couples, when they marry, enjoy a higher material standard of living than they will ever experience again in their lives, as they move into a new or renovated apartment, wear new clothes from their trousseau, sit on new furniture and eat from new plates, cooked in new pots and pans” (1989, 76). The couples in my sample and the families surrounding them still seemed to have the same attitude towards their first household goods. The furniture they purchased for the wedding was not to be replaced with better or new ones in the future. The family’s income doesn’t allow them to do so. For example, when the oven Gihan bought herself with the money she made working in a upper-class restaurant in Zamalek broke after a few years of marriage, she didn’t have the financial means to replace it. Moreover, in a later stage of married life, a couple’s grown up daughters will need their parents’ support for their own dowry, so that it has become tradition that people provide for their children instead of for themselves.

However, there is also a sense of progress in the economic level if we merely consider the purchases of consumer items for the house after marriage. Nowadays many companies in Cairo offer the possibility of paying off their goods in terms. The contracts they offer tend to be of long duration and with monthly payments that consist of relatively low amounts of money. This enabled people in my sample to buy products such as air conditions, computers and mobile phones. I’ve witnessed several families where there was hardly enough money to buy food everyday or to send children to better schools, while their apartments were perfectly decorated and equipped with all sorts of modern devices. Most of their monthly salaries disappeared into paying off these debts.

The *gam‘iya* is a saving system in which a group of friends or family members each pay a certain amount of money a month for a determined period of time, and each person takes the sum of monthly payments during one month. This system enables people to gather large sums

of money which they use for unexpected expenses such as healthcare, but also, for example, to repaint walls in their apartment. These are ways working class families are able not only to survive but also to improve their materialistic level of life throughout their marriage.

### **LOCATION OF HOUSE BEFORE AND AFTER MARRIAGE**

The activities of a young couple in Būlāq center around the woman's family before marriage. This is visible in the use of spaces before marriage, and we could say that the engagement is a matrilocal event. While the first meetings occur in spaces in and outside the neighborhood such as the street, work places and universities, the official events related to the proposal take place inside the house of the woman's family. The interested man sends a female member of his family, such as his mother or sister, to the house of the woman he is interested in. The women of both families then have a first "preliminary" conversation during which they discuss the matter informally. A second meeting follows the first at the same house during which the fathers from both sides are present as well. At this point it is important for the male party of the deal to lay out their cards: the groom's occupation and the apartment he can offer. If he doesn't have an apartment or a profession the chances that the woman's family will accept him decrease.

"When Ayman came to marry Gihan my brother asked him what his circumstances were and what he would bring. When he didn't agree with something he told him to bring that too," Umm Ahmed told me. In case both parties don't agree during this meeting they take an extra week or two to think. During this week the woman's family asks around about the man to acquire as much information about him as possible.

After the agreement, which both parties make in the reception room in the woman's house, they will hold an engagement party in the proximity of the same house. During the engagement the woman's house remains the main space of all activities. The engaged woman never visits the house of her fiancée, but he comes to regularly visit his fiancée at her family's

house, mostly on Fridays, when the family leaves them together in the reception room but watches them from another room.

After the wedding there is a spatial shift of events to the groom's family's area. While the engagement is matrilocal, marriage in Egypt is traditionally patrilocal. According to SYPE data, forty percent of married male youth and 36 percent of married female youth in Egypt reported that they lived with the husband's family upon marriage (SYPE 2010, 122).

At least twenty couples I met lived in the building of the husband's family. Each couple had an apartment of themselves, and I have not come across any instances where the new married couple lived directly with the husband's family. Buildings in the neighborhood have four floors on average, and sons of one family traditionally each take an apartment on a separate floor upon their marrying. In some case the father had let the other apartments while his sons were still young to renters from outside the family.

The distribution of apartments in a family building among brothers seems to follow a first-come, first-served policy, as well as a hierarchy based on brothers' age. Often the youngest son ends up getting the highest available floor, reachable only by climbing several pairs of stairs. He sometimes needs to build a new flat on the roof of the existing house. Among one family an older brother had taken a bigger apartment on the highest floor while his younger sibling shared a floor with a widowed woman to whom the family had chosen to continue subletting.

In another family an older sister, whose husband had passed away, had an apartment in the building too. When one of her brothers married she had to move to an apartment on the ground floor with her adult children which was in much worse a state. In one family the father, and head of the extended family kept the biggest apartment, but in another family the aged and widowed grandfather had no choice but sharing a bedroom with his three granddaughters on the street level while one of his sons took over his former flat.

In those cases where the building had been in the hands of the families for years, the sons and their wives paid no rent, while in other situations a newlywed couple perhaps was free of paying monthly rent but still had to pay back monthly loans they husband had taken to afford the construction of the apartment, as well as most of the furniture such as the complete bathroom and the floors.

The ownership of a building points to a more affluent lower class level, and is not standard for all families in the neighborhood. Many young men need to rent an apartment in one of the new built apartment buildings. These are quite expensive compared to most young men's budgets, which results in a delay in the age of marriage for men. One woman married a successful tiler, who rented a new flat which, according to one of her friends, should have been in Mohandeseen or Doqqi and not in an area such as Būlāq, as far as its size and beauty were concerned.

Whether the new apartment was in the groom's family building or elsewhere, it was in general never too far from the bride's parental house. If the couple left the neighborhood after marriage, it was to move to adjacent areas such as the working class part of Faisal. Only in a few instances a bride had come from a more distant neighborhood to live with her husband's family in Būlāq. I have not met any young couples who left the working class areas of their parents to live in a middle class area elsewhere in the city. If the economic level of children improves slightly compared to their parents, these improvements still remain within the borders of their class.

### **HOUSE VS. NON- HOUSE, FEMALE VS. MALE SPACE?**

Now that we have established the location of the house within the neighborhood geography, we will learn where newlywed men and women themselves are during the first year of their marriage. To examine this I've chosen to use the house in its presumed capacity of a central place in people's daily lives to track the everyday behavior of men and women. It



seems difficult to have an unprejudiced discussion of the gendered “identity” of the house because of the value the house has in so many cultures and periods as a woman’s territory and domain. Simone de Beauvoir describes how middle and upper class French men in the midst of the twentieth century had their main activities outdoors while their wives established their individuality through their actions in and decoration of the house, which was the main space of their daily existence. Half a century later and miles away from France, lower and lower middle class young women in Būlāq have their own particular relationship with the house, and men do to. Both of them have plenty activities related to work, leisure and shopping outside the door. However the view that the house is a woman’s place is widespread among the people in this neighborhood. There has been a gendered division of spaces inside and outside the home in this area of Cairo for decades. Unni Wikan wrote years ago that in Giza “the flat is a place for women to meet; men meet in the cafés” (1980, 51), which, as we saw in the previous chapter, still goes for today’s society.

For young married women their wedding marks the transition from a life where she was able to negotiate her access to the city, she worked, studied and went out, to a life where her main activities center around the house. In the first weeks after marriage women don’t leave the house at all. Nada’s mother explained to me that they give their daughter “liters oil and kilo’s rice and everything” so that she doesn’t need to leave the house the first months. She said that she could visit her mother after the first two weeks. Brides move into their new apartment with a large collection of the most sexual little dresses and underwear. Before marriage she proudly shows these items to friends and family, and they are popular gifts as well. Within the intimacy of the house women thus have the opportunity to wear a new set each night. “Where else do you think babies come from?” some women asked me laughing while they were buying fancy underwear.

Especially during early marriage some men are “careful” with their women and want to regulate all of her outings. When their wives leave the neighborhood without them they call every few minutes to ask where they are. Some scarcely allowed their wives to visit their families on Fridays, and forbade them to go when they were angry. When they did let them go they would only give them 5 pounds to pay their transportation, to make sure they couldn’t go anywhere else. For women who were only months ago used to have their own salaries and weekly outings with friends, this is a major transition. Ghannam (2002, 101) wrote that “it is important to remember that women’s access to public space shifts and changes over time.” For recently married women this is not always in their advantage, but it is also not always their husband’s doing. Their housework and children also keep them inside. As we will see, women from the neighborhood have their own responses to these new spatial expectations about their daily behavior.

Umm Sobhi (25) I met after I had ventured into a store in the neighborhood with the intention to meet new informants. The men inside had immediately called her while she was standing outside with some children, and they explained to me that she was their most loyal customer, and that I could ask her all I wanted. They introduced me to her saying I was from a university and wanted to ask her questions about marriage. Umm Sobhi took her task very seriously and took me into the labyrinth of small alleys behind the main street to find more women besides herself. “Are you recently married?” she asked every young woman we came across. When she finally allowed herself the time for an interview, she explained to me that women stay at home after marriage. “But”, she assured me, “I do go out to get groceries and things here in the street.”

In response I asked her if she left the neighborhood on a regular basis as well, and she replied: “Yes of course! To buy meat, for example.”

All women in the neighborhood were responsible for the work in the house, while men, if they worked, did non-house work but never did daily work inside the house. This traditional economic division of tasks is reflected in a gendered understanding of the house and non-house spaces as female and male. This reminds one of what Doreen Massey (1999, 180) calls the “power of convention and symbolism”, with which she points to the fact that an understanding among a society of the gendered value of spaces influences everyday behavior in these spaces. Indeed in this neighborhood the house has received a female identity. At the same time many parts of the city are inaccessible to women during parts of the day because of the male air many non-house spaces sometimes seem to have which makes these areas unsafe throughout the night in the opinion of many people in my sample. But we would risk to overlook a lot if we were simply to conclude that the house is a woman’s place and the non-house a man’s. For what, if we make this conclusion, do we know about the actual experience women and men have inside and outside their houses? This dual way of categorizing the spaces of house and non-house doesn’t immediately help us understand the daily conducts of young couples better.

Yet many people in my sample would not deny that reality was categorized in such a dual manner. Mervat, a young woman who has been married for a year now, fits very well into this description. Among her family and friends her husband is known as “Si Sayyid”, the unrelenting patriarch in Naguib Mahfouz’ trilogy. When I asked Mervat whether she thought that after marriage the home is the central place of a woman’s life, she immediately replied with a convinced “yes, of course.” She then continued to explain what places outside her home she went on a daily basis.

“I can go to the market or even if I go with his mother he lets me go to a friend in a nearby street and we can come back late, at 11 or 12 and it’s no problem. Or I can go alone and he comes to pick me up.”

I expected a relationship between the perceived level of exteriority or interiority of a place and the permission Mervat's husband gave her to go places by herself. Therefore I asked her if she could go wherever she wanted within the neighborhood but not outside of it. She replied first with a sarcastic laugh and then said:

“Ahmed is even afraid about me *inside*. It's a *sha'bi* neighborhood you know so there are criminals (*baltagiya*) and it's not safe anymore since the revolution. In the past everything was safe but now you hear everybody complain about criminality and also the harassment of women has increased. If I go out to Sayyida Zeinab with my mother it's ok, but alone it's not. I can go Downtown like during the day to get something if I tell him. But the thing is that going out is nicer at night.”

When we visited a henna-party of one of her friends some blocks away from her house, her mother-in-law accompanied her to the party to watch her, and they adhered to their time of departure accurately, so as not to be accused of being late.

But to say that in situations such as these a bossy man limits a woman's mobility does not do complete justice to the cases I have witnessed. Some women complained about dominant husbands but at the same time they believed this dynamic to be a legitimate one and they were responsible to continuing it themselves. One can always wonder of course, how much choice they really have when a life as a divorced young woman is economically unaffordable, and would mean she had to leave her own house and return to her parents. Nevertheless, Mervat had an outspoken opinion about her cousin who apparently had a somewhat freer lifestyle than herself, and whose husband wasn't as strict as her own.

“My cousin lives nearby and her husband lets her go out whenever she wants. When she says I want to go to a *nadi* (club) with friends he says fine. And she is fat you know but she can wear jeans or anything she wants.”

When I asked which situation was preferable, she said:

“Mine of course. A man is supposed to look after you. To have *rugūla* (masculinity). It's nice when a man cares for you and worries about you. Men don't even have it anymore like in the past. You know I saw a woman in a microbus and her husband

was sitting next to her and when they had to get out she told the driver to stop while her husband just sat there! And she also paid! Can you imagine. That's ridiculous right. When you'll marry you'll know how nice it is that a husband takes care about you. Are men like that in Holland?"

However, Rahma presents us with a completely different story. Rahma was twenty-one years old when I met her and in her first year of marriage and seventh month of pregnancy. She told me that nobody could expect her to stay in the house all day. She had just come from cleaning her father's house, because her mother had passed away and none of her brothers, "of course", would do that for him, and even if she was too tired from being pregnant she didn't mean to leave him alone all day in a dirty house! On our first meeting she told me:

"I still study, I'm at university in my second year. My husband is too. Yes there are women who stay home when they get married but not me. I would die from boredom. I need to go out every day. I love to go to Citystars or Carrefour, for example."

And Rahma isn't an exception. Non-house work in addition to outings related to shopping and leisure is, and has been, common among not only unmarried but also young married women in the neighborhood. Though in the mind of the neighborhood community married women in the neighborhood are "*sittāt bēt*", house wives, the reports I collected support the idea that this is not at all true for all women in the neighborhood. Economic incentives have led many women outside of their houses and neighborhoods to work. Already in Homa Hoodfar's sample in the 1980s many women worked and her report shows that many husbands were pleased with the opportunity their wives' incomes offered for them to spend less on the household budget. During a walk through the neighborhood one witnesses women working as retailers in all different sorts of shops, helping in carpenter workshops or working as nurses behind the windows of nurseries.

The experiences young married women in the neighborhood have with non- house work are varied. Most women I met wanted to work because they wanted to improve their situation but found themselves restricted by the opinion of their husbands, the care for their children

and the house or lack of training. In one family, the mother of one woman in my sample worked every day except for Friday while she herself worked too, but stopped doing so when she married. Her older sister worked before her marriage as well and then stayed home for her children. She wants to work but says it's impossible to combine work outside the house with the care for her children and her work in the house. She constantly considers possibilities to work from home, to sell things, sew or prepare food and dreams of opening a restaurant. When we made the calculation of how much the costs of a nursery in the neighborhood would distract from her salary if she decided to bring her children there and work, it turned out that with around forty to fifty Egyptian pounds per child a month, and a salary of around 400 pounds she would still be able to gain a few hundred pounds. But this couldn't convince her, because she was sure her husband would never agree. Now she secretly cleans apartments in nearby formal neighborhoods on Friday when she can leave her children with her mother. "When my husband finds out," she says, "he will divorce me".

Mervat used to work as a receptionist at a nursery in Mohandeseen, but her husband didn't want her to work after their marriage and she has stayed home ever since. Now most days she only leaves the house on her daily trip to the market, where she spends an hour to find the cheapest vegetables for dinner. She didn't see her friends and colleagues as often anymore and complained extensively about how bored and lonely she felt in her new environment. Her sister calls her husband a donkey, because her work at the nursery not only provides a good income but also the possibility for her to bring her son with her and have him follow lessons at an early age and level to which other children in the neighborhood don't easily have access. Her husband however is convinced that as long as he can provide for his family, his wife doesn't need to work. He leaves every morning, six days a week, around five am to work in construction in an upper-class new housing area on the other end of the city, only to return home at six pm. After dinner he works in the barbershop his family owns on the ground floor

of their building. Still his salary is hardly enough for his family to have enough to eat throughout the month.

Mervat's story corresponds with some, but not all reports of young women in the neighborhood. Mona, one of Mervat's former colleagues who only got married several months ago, says her husband is much better than the other ones.

"Most men in Būlāq are annoying (*rikhmīn*), you know, like Mervat's husband, they don't let their wives work or anything. My first fiancée was like that."

"Like what exactly?" I asked.

"Like Mervat's husband, I got fed up with him (*itkhana't*), so I ended the engagement. My husband is nice, he's funny."

Mona is pregnant for five months and works in a nursery in a suburb at least 45 minutes away from her house. She takes three different microbuses to get there. "I need to work because of our circumstances. After the baby is here I will stay home for a while and then bring him with me to my work. It's a boy. When I found out I cried because I really wanted a girl."

Though Mona herself says that a husband such as hers is rare, I have met several other women who continued working after marriage. Nahla, for example, is another young woman who was married for a year and seven months pregnant when I met her. She worked five days a week in a nursery where she made around 400 pounds a month. She said that she'd rather not work but that she and her husband wouldn't have enough money if she didn't. Umm Mervat, who is a woman in her early sixties shared her point of view about the situation in the neighborhood:

"There are men who don't want their women to work even if they don't have enough to eat. And there are men who don't spend on their wives at all. My husband didn't spend enough on us so I had to find a job. When I did he felt like now I could take care of myself and he left and married another woman. After she

died her sons always came to eat here, but they never spent a pound on me. They never even bought me a present for mother's day. But Amira did and I'm not even her husband's real mother."

When she was finished telling the story, she added: "you should write about these things in your research."

For men it is not as much of a question if they leave the house after they marry or not. Men's relationship with the house is different from the days of their youth onwards. They go out more and often seem to make place for women's gatherings. For example, unmarried young women have a curfew at night, sometimes as early as seven o'clock, but young men can stay out all night if they want to. Men's work in general is outside the house, even though workplaces are sometimes very close to the house. Some households run small shops right underneath their building, such as carpentry workshops, hairdressers or private retailers. During my research, I have often seen men arrive, stay for dinner and leave again for second jobs or to meet their friends in nearby cafés. In the families I visited the men were only rarely the ones who stayed home at night to watch television with their children, but women always did. In their turn women were never the ones to leave home at night to go hang out with friends in the street, unless it was near the doorstep of their building with their children playing in the street.

The following anecdote shows how women presume that men are not home during the day. We learned earlier that in Būlāq, alleys are often narrow and that only a small distance separates balconies and windows on each side. Some women make use of this to maintain their contacts, and it is not rare to see two women lean on their balcony engaged in a vivid conversation. However, I've also many a time encountered women who were careful not to stand in front of the window or not to open the blinds because otherwise male neighbors would be able to see them. Mervat kept all her windows closed night and day, and the curtains as well. One day, her sister, upon visiting her, was sure to open them all. Mervat and her



sister-in-law Amira in response made cries such as “watch out!” and “don’t stand in front of the window” whenever Gihan approached the windows with her bare arms and unveiled hair. But Gihan said that she didn’t care.

“There aren’t any men here anyway. Are there men at home during the day? No, there aren’t. They’re all at work!”

“But suppose they are unemployed!” Amira argued, and later she added: “You only dare standing like that because your husband isn’t here, but if he would come you would act different!”

Next thing Mervat closed the windows again, but her older sister soon reopened them to clean and let fresh air come in, a sequence they repeated several times.

Another example further supports the idea of the house a woman’s space and the street as a male territory. I knew three married sisters who one day had invited me to “celebrate” their free family-Friday with them and had prepared a lot of food and were very excited. All of them had gathered together with their children in their parental house, that one of them shared with their retired father. Besides their father the family contained two other male members, their twenty-odd brother and the thirteen year old son of one of them. The mother of the boy insisted on her son to leave before lunch, as he was supposed to visit some family members in another part of town, and she didn’t want him to stay for the meal.

The younger brother, who was about my age, kept walking around us but he never sat down and left to hang out with his friends on the street, right beneath the house. Apparently he told all those friends that I was in the house because when two children went down to get some groceries they ran up and said that the men in the street had asked them when “that Dutch girl” would come down again. At the same time, two groups were gathered inside the house and outside of it.

Man has his own spaces in the house, but he also has his territory in the street. That men are as little welcome among women's gatherings in the house as women in their cafés in the street stresses that the idea of house as a woman's place is not only a matter of seclusion to which men "subjugate" the women around them, but more of a gender segregation that has consequences for both genders and that both men and women, to a certain extent, perpetuate.

### **SEGREGATION WITHIN THE HOUSE, SHIFTING FEMALE AND MALE SPACES UNDER ONE ROOF**

"This demarcation of spaces and practices along gender lines can be traced from the abstract geography of public and private spheres to the local geographies of everyday life – the street, the office, the kitchen, the bedroom – and the micro-divisions of space within them (being at the head of the table, say, as opposed to having one's arm in the sink)" (Tonkiss 2005, 97).

We have pointed out that there is a segregation of male and female spaces between the house and the non-house. Within the house this segregation continues. I once had lunch at a family's house. When the women prepared to serve the meal and asked their father and only man present to join us in the living room he said it was inappropriate for him to sit with us women and that he wanted to eat alone in his own room. During my first visits to female friends in the neighborhood, their husbands never talked to me directly. If they wanted to say something to me they said it indirectly via their wives. They told their wives to "ask her if she wants water", or "what does she study", or if I needed the air conditioning, but that later changed and they then talked to me directly. This segregation of actions produces gender identities of spaces in the house on the long term but also more temporary uses of space along gendered patterns of actions.

This makes that gendered spaces in the house aren't always fixed objects. They are relationships that depend on time and the actions of the people who produce them. There is only a female space where there is a male space opposite to it. Men and women create, define and reproduce these spaces in time through segregated actions. In the city we can think of

many spaces that have gendered meanings that stay the same over longer periods of time. For example, male and female bathrooms in a restaurant have the same value for years (cf. Browne 2004), and so can the male barbershops and cafés in the neighborhood we came across earlier.

In the house we find fluid gendered meanings of spaces as well as fixed ones. Just as the house has received a “female air” in the minds of people in the neighborhood, certain spaces within it have too, but the use of these spaces differs so much throughout the day that perhaps the idea is fixed in time, but actions are not. The children’s or family room, when present, is among the most central and intimate spaces in the house. Here important events of everyday family life take place. Not only is it the place where the children, and in many cases also the mother, sleep, but is also where the family socializes, has breakfast, lunch and dinner and watches television. Often when families owned an air-condition they had put in the children’s room and used it a few hours at night when the family gathered there. People think of this room as a female room and male or unacquainted visitors don’t usually have access to this room.

I once had dinner with a family in the neighborhood when the husband received two male guests. While the wife, the children, and myself stayed in the children’s bedroom where we had been eating, the men took place in the living room. I had for some reason expected the door to be closed between the two rooms, but it turned out that what I first understood to be a matter of concealing, was instead a matter of segregation. The wife entered the living room to offer the men drinks, and the men could see us, but were not supposed to sit in the same room, and didn’t talk to us.

The living room has much less importance in the family’s daily life. This room receives a lot of attention in terms of decoration, is often the biggest in size, and it has the honor of housing the china cabinet, which, if she has one, is an object of proud of every married

woman I've met. Each piece of porcelain in it she saved throughout her teenage years. But this room is more a show off room to guests than that it has a prominent function in the daily life of the family. It is this room that becomes a male space when men visit, and where women have access to the children's room, for visitor men it's less likely to go there.

Massey (1999, 171) argues that "the identity of place (...) is always and continuously being produced". The gendered value of a space, its female or male identity, indeed lives on in people's minds because their daily actions reproduce it, and because their understanding of a space determines what men and women do in it. Yet, despite this understanding people's daily actions also cross understood boundaries of gendered spaces, with in the end perhaps a new understanding of the femininity or masculinity of a space such as the house but also rooms within it. But a difference between the idea and daily practice does not necessarily mean a problem. Men and women sometimes use each other's spaces, without their actions changing the identity of a space that exists in the mind. Another example may give further support of this idea. For Youssef's first birthday, his mother had organized a party for which she had invited family and friends, all of them women. There were two men in the house, the father of the birthday boy and his brother-in-law. They had brought Pepsi-cans and sweets, but didn't take part in the celebration. Instead they sat together upstairs. The upper room, the only bedroom in the house, was normally an intimate space where women rather than men sat together. Now the women had taken over the living room and the men were "secluded" in a female space.

During a particular moment there can be a certain interpretation of the identity of a space, which is in itself more fixed in time. Abstract identity of a space and concrete interpretation do not always correspond. For example, the living room is part of a woman's territory during the day, but at night when a husband receives male guests in the same room it becomes a male space. In the end the idea or identity of a space always keeps influencing actions until finally

actions change a space's identity. We can say therefore that gendered meanings of spaces are embodied relationships that change in time.

### **PERSONAL SPACE IN THE HOUSE AND TERRITORIES**

Our attention to the gendered meaning of spaces in the house does not cover all of the spatial meanings and dynamics one finds there. The idea that certain spaces belong to men and others to women is related to the idea of territories and personal spaces. After the transition to the new house husband and wife both need to find their own places in the house, such as the place on the couch where he sits every night to watch television or the side of the bed she sleeps on.

Struggles about authority and autonomy in the new house sometimes accompany the transition to married life in a shared home space. For men to deal with a space that is widely understood to have a female identity seems to be a question awaiting a certain reply from their side. One morning I was having breakfast with Nada and her mother, when we heard a lot of screaming downstairs followed by a sound of breaking glass. A few minutes later a young man with a furious expression came into the room. I soon learned he was Nada's older brother, twenty-three years old and recently married with Omnia, who was nineteen years old and six months pregnant. His mother tried to calm him down, but he was enraged.

"That woman does nothing but sleeping all day long," he screamed, "it is already eleven! I come home and I still find her in bed!"

We later went down to Omnia's apartment to see how she was doing and found her crying, because she had a cold and was tired from the pregnancy and wasn't able to get up, and upon coming home her husband had thrown a vase from the cabinet at her that broke. An hour later husband and wife had solved their fight again, and both were watching Nada's proud demonstration of her wedding items. His mother soon sent her son away to "leave us women among each other".

The young woman who leaves her paternal house comes to live in a completely new environment. Even if she marries among family, which only one woman in my sample did, she still has never lived anywhere outside her father's house before. Her husband's family at the same time needs to adjust to the newcomer too. When the couple has its own house outside the extended family's house, the main person the wife needs to adjust to is her husband, but otherwise there are brothers and sisters-in-law and parents-in-law. The move thus results in an interesting dynamic between the men and women living in the house and the new inhabitant, who mostly interacts with the other women in the house.

Among all these people a bride must find her own territory which sometimes clashes with the priorities of others. Mervat did not seem very happy with the interaction between herself and her in-laws. Her mother-in-law watched her entering and leaving the building and reported all her daily movements to her husband. When her sister-in-law married and left the house, Mervat had to take over her role and cook for her mother-in-law. Every night around 6:30 pm there was a soft knock on the door and the mother-in-law would be standing there ready to eat. To me Mervat complained that she had hardly enough money to cook for Ahmed, herself and their one year old son, and that she didn't understand why her mother-in-law didn't just go eat with Ahmed's older brother and his wife who lived a few floors lower.

Gihan at some point got involved in a fight with two of her sisters-in-law, one of whom lived on the ground floor of the building and the other on the second. Every day when she would leave the house she had to pass by the door of their apartments which they often left open. Farha Ghannam (2002) illustrates how doors within apartment buildings in another low-income area Cairo carry important symbolic value. When a family closed their door this was almost an offense to their neighbors. In Būlāq many doors were closed, which we can understand in the light desires for privacy that we discussed in chapter three. In this situation it was the open door that the family used to make their sister-in-law feel uncomfortable, for

she had much rather have them close it so she could pass unseen. They also used to make noise through an ventilation pipe in the building to let her know they were all having dinner together and she wasn't invited.

The young Nada, on the other hand, was all too happy with the company of her brother's new wife, who had come to live in the apartment on the floor below her father's. The two women were roughly of the same age, seventeen and nineteen years old each, and soon became friends and spend most of their days together, from breakfast to dinner. Omnia helped her sister and mother-in-law in the kitchen to prepare the meals and her husband and she shared all meals in his father's flat.

Edward Hall wrote that "the self as we know it is intimately associated with the process of making boundaries explicit" (1969, 12). This process begins in the house, the most inner space, where each person demarcates his own spaces. These spaces can be fixed spaces such as a room for oneself, but if there is less room in a house one can create personal spaces on a less official and fluid level, such as the place one sits everyday at mealtime, or the closet a woman puts her perfume in her shared bedroom.

Even in a small house one can find spaces to be alone, spaces as a balcony or roof that become personal when nobody else is there. Ishraa, an unmarried young woman, her two sisters and their mother slept together on two beds in their one bedroom. They had one other living room, which was also a bedroom for guests, and another room outside in the hallway they didn't use except when strangers visited. They had a little television that was on all night, and they slept with the lights still on and other people in the room still talking. None of them had a room of their own, but in this small and dense environment they managed to make private spaces in creative ways. At night Ishraa, who is eighteen years old, installed herself in the living room underneath a blanket on one of the couches when her mother and sisters were in the bedroom. "She is going to talk to her 'gal'," her sister said. There were no doors

however and as I sat in the bedroom I could still see her. Because we kept laughing and smiling at her Ishraa turned off the light in the room she was in so that we could no longer see her. She had a whispering conversation with probably a boyfriend, about whom her family knew but pretended they didn't. All her mother said was "and that in front of us", but she spent no more words on the issue. If not distance even darkness and silence can produce privacy.

### **HOUSE AS SPACE OF INTIMACY**

The walls of a house create a space of privacy and intimacy. As we saw, personal and private space is not necessarily confined to a home or inside space. A couple can create an intimate space for themselves on a bridge or in a park, where people can see them, but not know them. Intimate space outside may allow for intimate matters to be discussed, but does not provide the freedom for intimate actions. The house, however, is an inside space, that is in itself private. Even if public matters enter the house, private matters don't go out as easily as long as doors stay closed. When one is alone a place like this offers opportunity for a much more private space than the ones we sometimes create around ourselves outside.

From the scarce conversations I had about intimacy between couples, the general idea women gave me is that this is something that doesn't exist before marriage. Physical relationships with men are beyond limits for most women in the neighborhood. Umm Youssef, who has been married for about three years, told me how wrong it is for unmarried couples to hold hands and sit close to each other in parks, but then made the following confession.

"But with Ahmed after the *Katb al-Kitāb* we kissed. That was not forbidden [*ḥarām*] but it's still wrong. But we wanted to get closer to each other so that it wouldn't be too much of a shock during the *dukhla* [wedding night]. Because I was a virgin and didn't know anything. Before the *Katb al-Kitāb* he would only



kiss me on my forehead, when nobody could see it. Of course my mom didn't know that we kissed after the *Katb-al-Kitāb*. It were simple things, *ya'ni* we hugged and kissed, here when we would be busy furnishing the apartment. But not *al-gimā'* [sexual intercourse]. You have to wait with that until after the *ishhār*, when you make the marriage known to the public and have a wedding and the *dukhla*."

This seems a good example of the possibilities closed inside spaces create for people who can find anonymity in outside spaces but yet not the freedom to act as if no one watches. For unmarried couples in the neighborhood such inside spaces are not easily accessible. This made Umm Youssef think the following.

"You know actually I think the sex thing happens more among the higher classes. You know me, and my mother and my sister are middle class. But people in Mohandeseen or Ma'ādī have more places where they can be together. You know they have cars. Or they can say like my parents are not home come stay at my place and the neighbors wouldn't know. Here in Bulāq you're never alone and everybody knows you. If some guy visits a girl then all the neighbors would be like who's that."

Inside spaces such as the home are a privilege that offer a privacy within a densely populated neighborhood that both men and women in the neighborhood seem to cherish. It is this privilege to which young couples must look forward to obtain: to finally have a room of one's own.

## CONCLUSION

In Būlāq, there is a particular time and space division between house and non-house based on gendered patterns of behavior that follow a division of labour that allocates housework to married women and non-housework to men. Women's mobility in non-house outside spaces can be as restricted as much as men's is in the house, during certain parts of the day. Traces of this strict dualism of gendered actions are visible within the walls of the house

as well in the form of female and male identities of certain spaces such as the living room and the family or children's room. Moreover, daily actions produce temporary gendered meanings of space based on contrast: when a group of women has a party in a more spacious living room, the other room becomes a space for uninvited male family members.

Besides the production of gendered meanings of space there is also a daily reproduction of personal spaces. Within small houses this happens in creative ways. Territories become relations more than objects that shift through time as people create them at those places in the house where they can be away from others. In the first year of marriage the transition from the parental house to a new personal yet shared home causes struggles about territories.

The way people produce meanings of spaces within the house is not isolated from that outside it. This is exactly the reason why it is important to focus on the micro level of space. Spatial divisions that originate in the house do not stay inside the home but continue within the neighborhood and the city. Inhabitants of cities share spaces together with people that may have different or similar understandings of spatial meanings. These influence city life and policies as well as dynamics in the job market and segregated behavior in public spaces.

Neoliberal policies worldwide produce cities with an unbalance of very wealthy and very poor spaces, that both rapidly expand as a result of the lack of governmental regulation, while middle class spaces are on the return. Cairo is one of these cities with a growing concentration of wealth among rich who either choose to leave the original city center to live in gated communities and new neighborhoods on its edges, or privatize spaces in the older neighborhoods while they appropriate open spaces along the Nile and turn them into clubs accessible only with membership, fill the city's formal areas with relatively expensive restaurants and cafés, open private schools and move around solely in their cars. All these spaces are not accessible for the poor, who live in expanding informal areas where infrastructural and hygienic conditions are far below common standards, crowded places with no pavement, no garbage pickup, animals everywhere, no parks, no sidewalks etc., and move around the city using (semi)public transportation (crowded buses, minibuses and metro) or on foot. Their neighborhoods know a moral economy which strictly regulates social interaction between men and women. In Būlāq, unrelated men and women are not supposed to meet or talk to each other, especially when they are young.

Focusing on the division of spaces neoliberalism has created in Cairo, enabled me to ask sets of questions that were particularly useful to understand contemporary meeting and mating in Cairo. How, for example, does such a configuration of spaces influence young people from poor neighborhoods in the way they meet, choose and date people in the city? Why, as we said in the very beginning, do we see all these people holding hands on the same bridge, day after day? Why does Cairo have such clear geographies of romance? What romantic and gendered meanings do they allot spaces in the city and why?

When I first started my explorations on the romantic adventures of the young in Būlāq, I tended to concentrate much more on the meanings they gave to spaces in the city, as well as the existing meanings spaces had in their eyes. However, to purely look at the meanings spaces have in the eyes of their users, i.e., focus on spaces' identities of female, male, romantic, dangerous etc. is not enough to fully understand the historical present. Such an understanding requires one to look to much broader economic and political forces that shape the urban and life world of its inhabitants. For example, to explain why so many young people from the same areas set out to a romantic bridge is then to say that that's because that bridge has a romantic value that is reproduced through people's romantic visits, while much more is at stake in their choices to do so.

I have shown that young people from Būlāq make creative use of spaces in the city to avoid availing expectations regarding chastity and respectability within the neighborhood. The mobility of young women allows them to make use of anonymous spaces far away from their neighbors and family to engage in romantic relationships with young men without having to fear for their reputation. Free or cheap-access outside spaces such as the bridges over the Nile, parks and zoo's become romantic sites where young people from low-income neighborhoods create temporary freedom and privacy where they do not have to obey the regulations of the neighborhood community. Within this meeting-system the female body is often central to initial encounters and male gazes make women aware of their embodiment day after day. However, women know very well how to (not) react to the looks of men and instead of fearing these ever present gazes they realize that to display their body is to possible find a much coveted husband, for, according to young women in the neighborhood, there are more women than men and it is an important responsibility to secure for oneself a decent partner. While engagements are supposed preparations for marriage and meant to transform into long-term relationships, the increased mobility of young women and the availability of

romantic spaces in the city add a romantic, fun element to engagements that make them increasingly interesting as short term relationships for men who don't have to fear for their reputation they way women do. This makes women feel vulnerable to possible deterioration of their "value" within the marriage market, though they themselves also don't hesitate to "break up" and continue with a better fiancée.

I have shown that the neighborhood is a major site for the production of gendered subjectivities, both through its moral economy and through the gendered meanings of its spaces. Though within large cities neighborhood ties tend to weaken, the importance of the community nevertheless increases. This is mainly a result of the unbalance between rich and poor within the neoliberal city. Spaces become increasingly separated and produce poor who look up to the rich yet condemn many of their ways, and rich who are afraid of the poor and stigmatize them with prejudices about criminality, immorality and ignorance. Such ideas are crucial in the formation of a moral economy that binds people in a neighborhood together yet weakens the ties among them when people to live to a certain standard start to attach increasing value to privacy. This search for privacy is partly what leads couples out of their neighborhood, but also what makes young people yearn for their own house.

A house of one's own is an important marker of adulthood in the neighborhood, much more so than, for example, careers that for many of them never become satisfactory. I have shown how the house in the neighborhood is perceived as a female space and that many women are proud to become the owners of houses and decorate them with items that they collected for years. But to mainly stay inside after such an engaged life in the "non-house" before marriage is not what all of them intend to do. Many wish to continue working and going out, though many of them also seem to prefer men who care for them and work. Women carefully negotiate their rights to spaces within and outside the house on a daily basis. Their mobility in the city is influential in how young men and women experience romance

before marriage, while her decreased mobility after marriage causes many challenges to their relationship.

The “urban geographies of romance” show that romantic encounters have a spatiality that isn’t arbitrary but the product of contemporary and local configurations of space and economic circumstances. Restrictions on where people can go and meet others in the city, for example in the form of privatization that limits the number of freely accessible spaces in the city, or ideas that relate exteriority of space to danger and limit the range of women’s activities away from the house during certain times of the day, lead to the creation of possibilities and negotiated use of those spaces where one can go, at the times when one is able to go there. The bridge over the Nile where we first walked is such a free place of romance, not for the rich who fear its crowdedness, but for those people who insist on their right to the city and their right to have privacy together with whom they want.

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